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ROSE'S STORY

Terence Brady & Charlotte Bingham

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Upstairs Downstairs

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The idea for ROSE'S STORY originated with the hugely successful television series UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS, in which Rose played a prominent part as head housemaid to the Bellamy family.

The authors, husband-and-wife team Terence Brady and Charlotte Bingham, have taken Rose's television character as the basis of their novel and have produced a fascinating account of the experiences that led Rose to the house in Eaton Square and into service with the Bellamys.

Also available in Sphere Books
UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS by John Hawkesworth

Rose's Story

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CHARLOTTE BINGHAM

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by

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Ever since she could remember Rose had always brushed her hair one hundred times, as her mother had taught her, while repeating the Lord's Prayer ten times. Tonight she did so with a little less of her usual vigour. She was tired. It had been a long day at Eaton Place, and she felt sleepy.

She opened her Bible, and started to read.

It was not long before she realised that her concentration was not as it usually was. A contributing factor might have been that she knew the piece in question off by heart, having learnt it once at school, but more than that perhaps, was the fact that tomorrow was her birthday. She was not in the habit of celebrating it, particularly since she was about to reach one of those ages that ladies like to forget, situated as they are between one thing and another, or as in her case, between twenty-nine and thirty-one.

Her Bible held the essence of most of her life between its leaves, because she had long ago developed the habit of keeping mementoes in between its pages.

In this way when she turned the pages, a picture the vicar had given her at confirmation would fall out, or a flower pressed on the occasion of a former birthday; or another picture given to her by the housekeeper at Southwold many years ago before she left to come to Eaton Place. Little things that mean nothing to anyone else, but hold the scent of the past for their owner as strongly as a perfume.

Here was poor Eddie's medal, sent to her after he'd been killed. There was a picture of her dog Tatty painted by

her brother Tim, and a ribbon worn on her hat at Lady Marjorie's wedding celebrations. And then towards the back, letters sent from Southwold over the years from her friend Albert, now a school teacher there.

All those years! And yet touching each object by turn brought back each memory, as if they were merely doors that she had only to step through, or push open with her hand.

CHAPTER ONE

Rose pushed open the kitchen door.

At least she began to push open the kitchen door, but first she wished for the thousandth time that her grandmother would go and live somewhere else, with someone else's family. Grandmother was about as gay as a funeral, but unlike a funeral, she went on and on.

It wasn't as if you could ignore her either. She was such a large woman. Tall, and big boned. Having Grandmother around on a birthday, or at Christmas, was like sitting around with a suet pudding on your head. Grandmother weighed everything down. Fun, as far as Grandmother was concerned, was something wicked people had when people like her had their backs turned, and of course they always came off worse for having had it.

Rose didn't like her grandmother, but she made a practice of not admitting it. This morning she was busy not admitting that she hoped very much that her grandmother would not already be up and standing by the stove, ready to spoil Rose's tenth birthday right from the start. And that was another thing about her, there was no getting away from her, because she was always first up and last to go to bed. Afraid to miss anything. Afraid that someone might start having a good time without her being able to be there and spoil it for them. Rose gave the kitchen door a little kick; it got rid of some of her feelings, but it was gentle enough so that Grandmother wouldn't notice.

Having kicked the door she then turned the handle and went into the kitchen. It was warm from the oven, and there were two round, freshly baked loaves on the table but no Grandmother. It was too good to be true. Just for one glorious second Rose wondered if she could possibly be dead, but that was too much to hope for, even if it was your birth-

day. Then she suddenly remembered that Mrs Burrows, Grandmother's friend in the next village, was ill, and that last night Grandmother had talked of taking her over something.

Only Mrs Burrows could drag Grandmother away from the Lodge, particularly on a birthday. Rose imagined her hurrying along the lanes to Mrs Burrows' cottage, her head filled with the uncomfortable thought that Mother and Father and Rose and Tim might all be having a nice time without her being there to spoil it. No doubt she would hurry back as fast as she could so as not to miss having a go at someone (having a go was Grandmother's second best pastime after spoiling a good time) but hurry as much as she could Rose knew that Grandmother could not possibly get back to the Lodge until the afternoon. For one thing Mathilda Burrows had a tongue as sharp as Grandmother's and if Grandmother didn't stay at least until after dinner time Mathilda would give her what for, and for another thing Mrs Burrows, ill or not, would fill her ear with such gossip that Grandmother wouldn't be *able* to tear herself away until after dinner time. So by and large, and the thought made Rose skip twice round the kitchen table, by and large they were all safe—Father, Mother, Tim and she, for, well, for a good long while anyway.

When Rose had stopped skipping round the table she bent over the kitchen table and smelt the loaf that Grandmother had baked prior to leaving the Lodge. It smelt so good, and it was still warm from the oven. She would have loved to have stuck her fingers in and broken off a piece, but it would show, and even Father would whip her for doing such a thing. Not that Father wasn't gentle, as gentle as Mother, but he would most certainly whip her or Tim if they touched any food.

Rose knew that they were luckier than most because they lived on an estate and folk that lived on an estate were better looked after, it seemed, than folk that didn't and had to fend for themselves. Her father was someone, and she was lucky enough to be his daughter. The daughter of the Earl of Southwold's Lodge Keeper—it was on account of this that they would never starve. Even when the harvests were as bad as they had been this year and the last year, even then

they never went hungry, they always got their flour to bake their bread and they could grow as many vegetables as they wanted, "enough for four or five families" Father would say when he stood in front of the rows of cabbages in the back garden. But it was all right to grow as much as you wanted so long as they could not be viewed from the road when the gentry went by, and that went for washing, or anything else too. The only thing the gentry must see when they went by were pretty things, like flowers, and Father being the sort he was, he made sure the flowers they saw were a proper eyeful. His spring flowers were something of a feature nowadays. And on the first warm day the Countess would make a point of getting her coachman to stop by the Lodge gate so that she could look out of her carriage window and admire the display.

Of course Father loved that, and he would bow from the waist down, and then blush as red as a poppy when she told him how much she looked forward to seeing his display each year. Father would give his life for the Countess, and not just because she was the Countess of Southwold either, as he was so fond of pointing out to Rose and Tim, but because she was a great and wonderful lady. Often when he had just said that, his eyes would stray to where Mother was sitting sewing in front of the fire, or darning at the table, and his eyes would sort of run over Mother, and Rose knew that he thought that Mother was the same—a great and wonderful lady. Someone you could really look up to and admire.

"Where's Grandmother?" Tim stood blinking in the sunlight, and doing up the buttons of his breeches.

"She's gone to see Mrs Burrows," said Rose gleefully, and then she eyed her five year old brother warily, waiting to see if he had forgotten that it was her birthday.

Tim touched her on the arm. "Did you manage it Rose?"

Rose looked down into his large blue eyes which were unaccountably framed by black eyelashes—contrasting with his yellow hair, like the contrasting fringe on a shawl.

Rose frowned. "Did I manage what?"

"You know, Rose."

She did know, but she liked to pretend sometimes that she

didn't understand Tim, that he was too young to make himself quite clear to her.

"Yes, I did manage it, if you really want to know."

Tim sighed thankfully, and Rose was glad she had lied to him. Well, not exactly lied so much as fibbed. She was glad she had fibbed to him. After all an elder sister was meant to be an elder sister, and part of being an elder sister was doing older kind of things, like staying awake until after midnight so that you can see the birthday ghost. The fact that she couldn't remember hearing the stable clock strike twelve didn't mean that she hadn't actually been awake at midnight. She probably just hadn't heard it that was all, although she had definitely seen her birthday ghost, quite definitely. It had been fairly tall, and wearing old fashioned clothes, like someone in a picture.

Tim sidled on to a chair, waiting expectantly for what was to come. He knew that Rose would not let him down, and by the time she had got to the bit about her ghost being as tall as a hayrick with boots that came over his knees, Tim's eyes were as round as round apples.

"I suppose I didn't hear anything at all?" he asked hopefully.

"You? You were snoring fit to bust, louder than Father."

"I just thought I might have heard one of his chains rattling, that's all."

"Well, you did turn over rather quickly when he came in through the window, as if you *nearly* heard him," Rose admitted graciously.

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did, but you definitely didn't *see* anything, most definitely not."

"No, well I couldn't if I were asleep. But I'm glad I *nearly* heard something," Tim looked gratefully at his sister.

"Oh, you nearly heard something all right."

Rose stood on tiptoe to reach the plates on the dresser, and then she very carefully lifted them down, and put them on the table. They were blue and white plates with a design of birds on them. Mother had bought them last year on market day, and Grandmother had grumbled that she wasted Father's money. As if Mother would waste anything of Father's, as if

Father wouldn't buy Mother the whole of Southwold estate, if he had the money for it. But then that was Grandmother. Always making remarks about other people which made them seem nasty, and remarks about herself that made *her* seem nice.

It was like the way Grandmother always referred to Mother as 'poor Lucy', and 'your poor Mother,' and even Father would become 'poor John', as if Grandmother felt deeply sorry for him, although why she should was a mystery to everyone, most of all Father.

Sometimes it occurred to Rose that Grandmother was afraid of Mother. She would speak about Mother's waist length black hair as if it was unnatural, and although Rose loved to see her mother coil her hair up into the massive chignon that she always wore, Grandmother would eye it with disfavour. Rose felt that Grandmother thought there was something improper about having such thick black hair, just like Rose knew that Grandmother thought Mother was giving herself airs and graces by wearing lace collars, and when Father was out of ear shot Grandmother would mutter 'it wouldn't surprise me if she had Romany blood'. Rose was sorely tempted to kick her on her ankles when she said that, because she knew that no-one proper had Romany blood, and that Grandmother had never forgiven Father for not marrying someone from his own village, and that was why she said such things.

"Happy birthday," her mother bent to kiss Rose, and Rose put up her cheek to be kissed, loving the smell that came from her Mother's clothes and hair, a smell so fresh and clean that it could only remind you of Father's garden on a warm day when all the flowers were out. Not like the way Grandmother smelt of carbolic soap, or cooking, and Mother's cheek was as soft as Tim's, not prickly like Father's and Grandmother's. She put her finger under Rose's chin and stared seriously into her face. "You are ten years old Rose," she looked grave, "ten years old, that is a wonderful age."

Rose caught Lucy's hand and kissed it, and rubbed her cheek against the back of it. She didn't like to ask if she was going to get a present. It didn't really matter if she was or not when Mother was around.

"Will you come with me to the end of the lane this morning since there is no school?"

"Yes Mother, please."

"Can I too?" Tim looked across at Rose imploringly.

"If Rose says yes, it's her birthday Timothy."

Mother always called Tim 'Timothy', and the way she said 'Rose' was quite different to anyone else. She rolled her 'r' sort of softly making it seem as if 'Rose' was a real rose that grew on a bush, which was rather how she always felt when she was near Mother. Mother made you feel delicate and special, and as if you were about to break, while Grandmother made you feel thin and ugly. Only last week when Rose had cut her knee Grandmother had said 'your bones are too fine wove, like your poor Mother's,' and Rose in spite of the fact that she was busy trying not to cry from Grandmother's having rubbed salt into the cut to clean it, in spite of that, she had been secretly thrilled at Grandmother's words, although she knew for certain she didn't mean them to be nice.

"Tim can come if he promises not to be noisy."

"I won't, Rose, promise I won't."

"Very well then."

Going with Mother down the back path to the end of the hedge was one of their treats, just as waiting for her at the same place at dinner time was one of the highlights of the day. Rose actually preferred to perform this ceremony of waiting for her mother on her own, as if it were a secret, but she knew that Tim was just as happy as her that Grandmother was away today, so it was difficult not to share their delight.

Half an hour later they set off, walking quietly beside their mother. Occasionally she would stop by a flower and ask them the name of it, and when they got it right she would look pleased. Mother smiled quite often, but she hardly ever laughed (not like Father who liked laughing nearly as much as a good dinner). It was as if laughing was something that other more ordinary folk did, while Mother could put as much into a smile as other folk put into their laughs.

At the end of the hedge Lucy bent and kissed each of the children in turn, and then, as she always did, she went a little

way across the wide lawns that crept up to the big house and waved. The children waved back watching her intently. She made a delicate outline against the large cedar trees whose branches spread across the lawns. She was slender and grey in her simple frock and shawl, while they, like giants from a story, frowned down on her looking as if their wide arms would like to bend and scoop her up.

Rose shivered. 'Someone walking across your grave,' Grandmother would say. Grandmother was full of phrases like that. Phrases full of death and sadness. She had once seen a hanging when she was young. She loved to tell Tim about it. Poor Tim, his eyes would start out of his head, because when you're only five you do frighten easily, not like ten. He couldn't even walk past the graveyard without breaking into a run. Father loved to tell stories about the graveyard. Particularly the one about the boy who dared to spend the night there, and was found dead in the morning. Father loved that one. It seemed that when he was a boy they'd all had a bet about who should dare to spend the night in the graveyard, and this one boy said he would. Well, it appears that Father and his friends left the boy in the graveyard, and from what they think happened, it must have been that he sat against a gravestone and his shirt got hooked on a nail, and he must have thought it was a corpse come to grab him and he died from the shock of it.

"Race you back."

Rose glanced sideways at Tim running beside her down the lane to the Lodge. She loved her brother, even though he was only five.

"For you, Rose." Tim pushed the little parcel into her hand. "I waited till Mother had gone, to surprise you."

"Not your best snail shell Tim?"

Tim looked at the contents of the parcel longingly, and then nodded. "I wanted you to have it Rose."

"I'll keep my little ring Mother gave me in it."

Tim looked a little doubtful about keeping a ring in it, but then remembering that you had to make allowances for girls, he nodded approval, and really when Rose tucked a piece of material into it, and then placed the ring carefully

inside it, it didn't look quite as silly as you might have thought.

"What would you like to play, Tim?"

"It's *your* birthday Rose."

"Never mind that, what would you like to play?"

"Could we play with my horse?"

"Very well."

They took the carved wooden horse into the garden. Father's garden was as neat as anything on the Southwold estate. Now in the summer it had everything from lavender to cabbages. Tim ran the horse along the path.

"Let's pretend it's the Queen's horse, and it's winning a race."

"No, the Prince of Wales'. He's much nicer."

Tim considered this, and then was forced to agree. After all, little though he knew of this person called the Prince of Wales, there was no doubt about it that he had a singular advantage over even the Queen—he was a man.

"All right. It's the Prince of Wales' horse, and it's winning."

They played until the stable clock struck twelve. Although the Southwold stables were some distance from the Lodge they could hear the clock striking in the still air of that summer morning, and as soon as they heard it they caught up the little wooden horse, and ran back to meet their mother. Down the lane again to the end of the hedge where they could again view the lawns and the cedar trees.

Possibly it might have surprised them if a visitor had stood behind them and exclaimed at the beauty that lay before them. Even so, a child will not wholly be able to ignore beauty however accustomed they are to it, and although they were ignorant of the fact that the old house that they could just glimpse through the trees was Palladian in style, nevertheless they knew it to be beautiful, even though they couldn't say why it was. And they were proud of it, and as people living in the shadow of some natural phenomena will talk about 'our mountain' they would talk about 'our house' as if they in part owned it.

When Lucy re-appeared walking slowly back across the lawns, Tim skipped ahead leaving Rose to walk beside her

mother holding back her disappointment that it now looked more than ever as if she would not be getting a present this year. She ate her bread and bacon dinner in silence, and then having duly thanked the Almighty for providing her with the same she got down from the table, unable to bring herself to go out and rejoin Tim in the garden, and at the same time at a loss as to what to do next. She had a very lively sense that something should happen on a person's birthday, but at the same time she knew that it was bad manners to expect something to happen. There was nothing for it but to go on hoping.

"Rose," Lucy wiped her hands carefully, "I want you to go and put your best dress on, and your shoes and stockings."

Rose stared at her mother. She had a very strong feeling that she was not hearing things quite well.

"Go quickly, Rose dear."

Rose went quickly, her heart not beating but hammering, She struggled into her shoes and stockings, having given her feet a good scrub, and then pulled on her best dress. She caught up its matching cotton bonnet, undecided whether 'best dress' meant just 'best dress' or whether it also meant 'bonnet to match'.

Her mother looked at her critically.

"Very nice, dear," she nodded, and taking the bonnet from her she tied its strings under Rose's chin, while smoothing her hair neatly to each side. She stepped back, and then after a little she nodded once more, and again said "Very nice, dear," which rather made Rose want to scream. But she knew that if she asked her mother why it was that she was required to put on her best dress and bonnet, as well as shoes and stockings, she knew that her mother would say something like 'you'll see', or just smile and touch her on the cheek, because Lucy loved giving surprises, and one of Lucy's surprises was always just that—surprising. She had once sewed Father a whole set of shirts without his ever finding out, and on another occasion made Grandmother a patchwork cushion for Christmas without her once suspecting.

They left Tim playing with his snails in the sunshine, and set off once again down the little lane that led back from the Lodge to the big house. Rose walked in some discomfort

because her shoes were a little tight. She hoped that her mother wouldn't notice. After all if you grew out of your shoes it could be quite a long while before you ever set eyes on another pair. And these were red, a present from the shoemaker to Father because he had done him a favour last year, and by way of thanking him he had made Rose a pair of shoes, the envy of all the other children at the village school.

She would have liked to have held her mother's hand as they grew nearer and nearer to the big house, but her mother was staring thoughtfully ahead, possibly not realising that this was the first time that Rose had ever been quite so near to the great building because, as everyone on the Southwold estate knew, ten years was the age that children had to be before they were allowed up to the big house for the annual Christmas party. Rose wondered suddenly if her Mother had suddenly taken leave of her senses when she opened a side door, and beckoned for her to follow.

Rose did follow her, but climbing the broad stone staircase in her wake, she wished her shoes were made of as soft a leather as her mother's, as were everybody's who worked in the big house, so that they wouldn't make a noise going up and down stairs. The Earl hated noise, in fact it was said that the merest clatter could put him in a bad mood for days and days. Father had said that this was on account of his having always been very foolish, since he was quite young. Apparently people who were bookish were inclined to want very little noise, so that they could read their books better.

Lucy knocked very quietly on the door in front of them. When a voice said 'come in, come in' Rose suddenly had a feeling that she was going to faint, which was very silly, because that was the sort of thing that little Lottie Collins was always doing, not Rose Buck.

Rose stood in the shadow of the doorway, and then very carefully just inside the door when her mother shut it behind them. She wasn't going to risk doing anything wrong, and letting Mother down in the big house. To let Mother down in the big house would be so terrible, and what would be much worse it would please Grandmother, something to be avoided at all costs.

At first, because it was dark, Rose could not take in just how large the room she was standing in was. It seemed to stretch endlessly in front of her. She watched her mother moving quietly down the length of it until she came to the fireplace where she curtsied in front of an old lady dressed in black.

"Ah, Lucy, there you are—pour my tea."

The old lady's voice was not English, in fact it wasn't like anything Rose had ever heard before, and then she remembered that of course the Earl's mother came from a place very far away called Russia, a place even further away from England than France, it appeared. Having remembered that, Rose felt a little faint once more at the realisation that she was not only standing in the big house, but that this was more than likely the person referred to by everyone on the estate as 'the old Countess'.

The old Countess' face was old, but when she looked at you her eyes were of such a brilliance that they looked as brown and polished as the furniture in the room, and you could almost imagine that you could see your image in them if you wanted to brush your hair or see if your face was clean. Her hair on the other hand was as white as a handkerchief. It was said that it had gone that colour when she was only twenty-eight and her first baby had died. Father could remember that time although he was only a boy then and not considered of any account. Apparently she had shut herself away, seeing no-one but her husband, until one day she had another baby —the present Earl, and started to go about again.

"She is only a little like you, Lucy," the Countess' hand lay on Rose's shoulder like the claw of the sick bird that they had released last winter. "Only a little like you," she said again, studying Rose's face intently, and then she looked at Lucy, "but enough to count."

Rose stepped carefully backwards to avoid making an unseemly noise, and also there were several footstools and things, so you had to watch exactly where you placed your feet.

"Sit down," the old lady indicated one of the stools. "Sit down."

Rose did as she was told, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on her red shoes.

"Give her a biscuit, Lucy. Do you like biscuits, child?"

Rose nodded.

"Your mother tells me you are ten today. Do you like being ten?"

Rose nodded again and tried to chew her biscuit in as delicate a fashion as her mother poured out the Countess' tea. The Countess had hands that were shaky, like Father's after Harvest Festival, so for a few minutes that was the only noise in the room, the rattle of her china cup on her china saucer as she drank her tea—that and the clock ticking on the mantelpiece in front of the big gold mirror that hung over the fireplace.

Eventually when she had finished her tea, the old lady beckoned Rose to stand near her chair. "Do you like telling the truth, little girl?"

"Sometimes," said Rose, and then somehow felt she had made the sort of answer that Mother might not like.

"Sometimes, yes, like most of us. Well, Mademoiselle Sometimes, tell me what you are thinking about as you stand looking at an old lady?"

Rose was silent.

"Of what do you think child?"

"I was thinking you had shaky hands, like Father after Harvest Festival."

The Countess laughed. In fact she laughed so much that Rose began to wonder if she would ever stop. And then she stopped and asked Rose what presents she had received on this, her tenth birthday?

"A snail shell only? I think that such a truthful little girl should have more than a snail shell on the day she has reached ten years. Fetch me that little box, Lucy. You may have this, ma petite, so that whenever you see it you will know there is a reward in speaking the truth."

Rose looked down at the little box. It had roses wreathed around the outside, and a knot of blue forget-me-nots in the middle.

"Roses for Rose, ca c'est bien, but don't you forget why

you came by it. Now go and play somewhere while your mother reads to me."

Rose wandered down the length of the long room until she came to a window seat. How strange it was to be sitting listening to Mother reading actually inside the big house. It was like a dream, and any minute she would wake up to hear Tim's snores, and try and cover herself with whichever bit of blanket he hadn't pulled off her. Of course she knew it wasn't a dream because she could feel the cold of the little box in her hand. She put it against her cheeks which were hot and red from sitting by the old lady's fire.

The view from the window was of green hills and trees, but directly below her she could see a garden that she had never seen before. It had fountains, and pillars, and a little house at one end of it and a pool with water lilies on it. Someone was sitting reading in the entrance to the little house. It looked to Rose as if it was a lady who was quite young. Her dress was very pretty. It was the colour of cream. And she wore a straw hat with roses and ribbons to match her dress. Rose liked things to match. Last week when there had been a garden party at the big house Rose had seen lots of dresses and hats going through in the carriages for which Father held open the Lodge gates. Her favourite had been one in pale blue worn by a lady with blonde curls who looked like a princess. Now she almost preferred the outfit below—blue was very pretty, but cream was almost better. She would have liked to have called to her mother to look, as she sometimes did when she and Tim were counting the carriages that went through the Lodge gates, but Mother was still reading. Mother read wonderfully well. That was another thing that Grandmother didn't like about Mother, the fact that she could read. And speak French.

In Grandmother's often voiced opinion, anyone who could read or speak French like Mother could wasn't proper. 'Leastaways, not when they're folk like us.' Folk like them, according to Grandmother, had no business with books and talking foreign tongues.

No-one knew how Mother came to speak French, or read for that matter, not even Father, which was rather exciting. There were quite a few things that Father didn't know about

Mother, because she never told him, and Father would never ask. It was enough for him, he said, that Lucy was a lady. And of course Rose could see that when he said that, in his mind he nearly always put 'great and wonderful' in front of 'lady', even if he didn't actually say it. If Father had taken the Countess of Southwold herself as a wife, he couldn't be more proud than he was of having had the privilege of marrying Mother.

The lady down below in the garden got up from her seat, and carefully shut her book. Rose noticed that she was wearing an engagement ring on her wedding finger, and that made her think that perhaps she was the Lady Marjorie, the Earl's daughter, who was getting married next year, but to someone of whom the old Countess didn't really approve, not being, Mother said, of a great and historic family like the Talbot-Careys, even though he was an honest gentleman, and had been at school with Lady Marjorie's brother.

Rose wondered if she would ever possess a parasol like the lady below. She hoped so.

It was late afternoon now. Her mother took her hand, and Rose bobbed her thanks to the old lady, and they walked back to the Lodge, neither saying anything. Not that Lucy talked very often, but Rose normally did. It was just that this afternoon there was so much to think about. First of all going inside the big house, and then meeting the old Countess, and her giving Rose the box, and then seeing the lady in the cream dress. Gracious heavens! there was enough in just this one afternoon to keep her and Tim going in games forever and ever. Already she could see herself making Tim pretend to be the old Countess, all doubled up, with a leaf on his head for her cap. And then walking to school next week she could pretend to be young Lady Marjorie walking graciously in the garden with her parasol.

She let go of her mother's hand, and ran into the kitchen to find Tim. He wasn't there—only Grandmother, back from seeing Mrs Burrows.

Rose automatically hid the little box behind her back. She had no intention of showing it to Grandmother. She would only make some remarks about it being too good, or think of some way that really she, Grandmother, should have it,

because she always did. Even if Father bought a tiny piece of lace for Rose from a gypsy, or some sweets off a stall in the market, she would always find some reason why he should be giving whatever it was to her. It was as if Grandmother was determined to make Father be grateful to her all the time, although grateful for what Rose had never yet discovered.

"What will you be doing in your best dress and bonnet, Miss?"

"Mother took me to the big house," Rose could hardly keep herself from sounding boastful, although the Bible was always telling you not to be.

"And why should she be going up to the big house?" Grandmother looked at Lucy. "They're so short they be needing her for dusting, no doubt."

Grandmother always said 'no doubt' when she was saying something she meant to be nasty, but she'd said as if she'd meant it to be nice.

Not very many minutes later she was saying 'no doubt' again, because if it wasn't enough that Rose had been given a box, and a snail shell to put her ring in, and a visit to the big house, and that she'd met the old Countess, if all this wasn't enough on her tenth birthday, then Father had to walk in the door carrying a puppy.

A puppy!

Just for a minute neither Rose, nor her mother, nor Grandmother, nor Tim who'd just wandered in from the garden, none of them could speak, they all just stared.

And then Father said very sheepishly, looking at no-one but Mother, "well but Lucy, I'd ha' loved one when I was a boy," and waited for her to smile, which she did, thank heavens, before he put the puppy into Rose's arms.

"Can I share him, Rose?" Tim looked at her so anxiously, it made her love him a little bit more even than she did already. She nodded, and they ran together into the garden and let it go on the grass. "What shall we call him, Rose?" Rose looked at the puppy. "We'll have to see what he's like," she said carefully. "You have to call animals a name that suits them."

"Yes, you're right, Rose," Tim agreed hastily, "you mean

as if it's like my snails. One being slimy I call him 'Slimy', and that kind of a thing?"

Rose nodded, but she didn't take her eyes off the puppy. At the back of them in the kitchen she could hear Grandmother arguing with Father and telling him he didn't ought to have brought home a fool thing like a puppy, and Father saying why not, and Grandmother carrying on about mouths to feed, and he had no more sense than a hen.

Rose sighed happily. Not even Grandmother mattered now she had a puppy.

"Come on," said Tim, "let's see if he'll fetch a stick."

CHAPTER TWO

Rose grew to know the Countess' rooms almost as well as the Lodge. Once or twice a week after her tenth birthday she would go across the lawns to the big house, and sit playing while her mother read to the Countess, or poured her endless cups of tea from something they called a 'samovar.' The old lady appeared to like Rose. Rose knew this because she would often make Rose sit near her, and then she would pinch her cheek and talk to her in a language that wasn't either English or French.

Sometimes the old lady would show Rose big books of drawings, and talk to her about what the drawings were about in her funny accent. Rose knew she was very fortunate to be allowed to sit in such a beautiful room, and look at books. She knew this, but sometimes she couldn't help wishing she was back in the garden of the Lodge playing with her dog Tatty. Of course she never said this to anyone because it would be very ungrateful, and she knew that she was more privileged than any other child on the estate. Not only that but the old lady often gave her sweeties, which she called 'bon-bons', and that was extraordinary because she gave them to her on days that weren't Sundays, and she and Tim would take them to the bottom of the garden and eat them, on a day that wasn't Sunday, and not even Grandmother could say anything because it was the old Countess who had given them to her.

The rooms that Rose sat in with the old Countess would have been magnificent to even the most sophisticated observer, but to Rose, who only dared to examine her surroundings little by little as her visits progressed, they were almost unbelievable. Naturally enough she knew that they must have cost a lot of money because there was so much gold paint,

but it wasn't just the gold paint that she marvelled at, it was the details of each room, which she—sitting quietly by a window, or playing with the pieces of an old chess set—had time to take in. And it was this very detail, rather than any one magnificent painting or piece of furniture, which imbued in her an even more fervent awe of the people she and her family were wont to call 'gentry'. She often wondered what it felt like to be the old Countess and go to sleep in a room with a ceiling with cherubs and angels all over it and to sit in a drawing room that had so many paintings in it that you could hardly tell what the wallpaper underneath was made of.

It was one of these paintings in the old Countess' drawing room that caught her imagination. An oval painting, not very big, of a young man with brown eyes and a large lace collar that sat crisply on his brown velvet suit. Rose thought him beautiful, and sometimes when she was closing her eyes to go to sleep she would imagine him stepping out of the picture and coming down to the Lodge to play with her and Tim and Tatty. The visits to the old Countess were less of an ordeal once she had the young man to think about. In fact, however much her shoes pinched, or however long her mother sat reading out aloud to the old lady, Rose didn't mind because she had her young Lord to think about. She knew he was a young Lord from the way he was looking down at everyone with an expression that only Lords and gentry were entitled to wear, and besides that—his features were that of a Lord. Only a Lord could possess such a fine straight nose, and such a proud curving mouth, and the feathers on his hat were so magnificent—only a Lord could afford them.

In her mind she and Tatty and Tim followed the young man all over the world, doing whatever he required of them. They were his faithful servants, and it was enough that he allowed them to serve him.

There were other pictures of course. But they weren't very interesting, nothing to compare with her young Lord. In fact some of them she found quite ordinary, and wondered how people who were so rich and could afford to buy anything they wanted, could keep such dull paintings. One was of an old lady—very like the old Countess—stitching a piece of

material. She looked just like real life which was more than some of the other pictures did but there didn't seem much sense to that. Why, Rose wondered quite frequently, why have a painting of something that you can see every day? There were lots of old ladies in the village that the Earl and Countess could come and look at. It was so strange that they should choose to hang pictures on their walls of such things. Just as it was very strange how many people in the paintings at Southwold had no clothes on at all. Not even a single stitch. Obviously there were reasons for this, but although Rose couldn't think what they could be, she knew that the ways of the gentry, like the ways of the Lord, were not to be questioned.

"Lucy, bring your daughter to sit beside me," the old lady said and shifted her feet on her embroidered footstool. Rose sat on the chair her mother pushed forward for her and then waited to see what this afternoon's lecture would be about. The old lady appeared to like to talk about all sorts of different things, and Rose appreciated that she was very lucky to be allowed to listen to her, but her mind would sometimes turn to other things, like the big emerald and diamond ring that the old Countess wore.

"Why are you staring at my ring, child?"

"Because it is so big."

"Do you think it is vulgar, Miss Truthfulness?"

"No, but it must have cost a lot of money."

"There is no value to be put on a piece like this, did you know that? Did you know that there are some things to which we cannot put a price?"

Because the old lady was a Countess, Rose was prepared to believe that what she said was so, even more than the parson on Sundays, or her mother, but she wondered how it were possible for anything to have a value above money? Money bought everything, if you didn't have enough money, you couldn't have anything, even if you were the Talbot-Careys. Even people like them needed money so that they could feed themselves and their servants, and buy things for their houses. And if people like her father and mother didn't have any money, they couldn't eat.

"When I was young I spent a lot of time in Moscow," the old lady beckoned impatiently to Lucy for another cup of tea, and then went on, "Do you know where Moscow is?"

Rose shook her head.

"It is where I come from, where I was born, Moscow is in Russia, which is very far away. Alors, when I was in Moscow I was seventeen. You cannot imagine this old lady being seventeen, but I once was that age, and I loved to dance. Mon Dieu —how I loved dancing! I could dance longer and better than most other girls of my age and it was one day when I was dancing at a great ball that Lord Charles Talbot-Carey saw me and fell in love with me, but he could never get near me to dance with me because I had so many partners. I believe it was a whole week before he could have the honour, and then it was that it happened."

The old lady fell silent. And Rose settled her eyes on the floor waiting until the Countess would see fit to tell her what it was that happened. She would have loved to say as she did with her father, 'what happened?,' but of course she never would. The old lady looked down at her eventually, "did you know child that when it happens it happens. Did you know that?"

Rose shook her head.

"Never forget it. If one day when you are a woman, you wonder how you will ever know love, remember what I say —you will know it, because when it comes it cannot be denied. Unless you are blind and deaf and dumb and even then I believe it cannot be denied, because you would feel it in your bones, even if you could not smell it, or hear it, or see it. When Lord Charles saw me he knew, and when eventually I danced with him—I knew. And the next day he gave me this—" they all looked at the emerald, Rose and Lucy and the old lady, imagining back in their different ways to that time when the old lady's waist was as slim as a wand, and her hands were as smooth as silk. Rose couldn't quite imagine what sort of dress she would have been wearing when Lord Charles saw her, but she thought it was most probably like the one in the picture in the room next door which showed the old Countess in a beautiful thin gold dress, with a white

bosom and hair as red brown and shiny as a chestnut when you first pick it out of its prickly case.

"He gave me this ring, and he left me to follow him to England, which I did, leaving behind my beloved Russia, family, everything I knew. Everyone knew me to be mad, except my mother. But, you understand, it was the ring that told me I was right, when everyone else was telling me I was not. It was my ring looking at me with its big green eye which led me to this great house and this damp land. I could not speak a word of English, only Russian and French, and that was terrible because I could not even tell a servant how to make my tea and even Vilanova was of no use, because all she would do was to cry. Mon Dieu, I have never seen so many tears as Vilanova shed in those first months that I was married. And as for Lord Charles, he frightened her nearly to death. He had only to come in one door and she would fly out of another. Imaginez-vous such a situation, like something in a play. Husband here, maid out there, maid in here, husband out there. Terrible. And now Vilanova is old woman like me, we are old women together. Only the ring is not old. The hand yes, but not the ring."

There was silence.

And then the old lady looked sharply at Rose and said, "Do you now understand why this ring is without value, priceless?"

"I think so, Your Ladyship," said Rose a little frightened, because the old woman was frowning at her quite fiercely.

"Why, then?"

"Because you would never, never sell it?" Rose ventured.

The old lady cackled with laughter, and muttered to Lucy something about Rose being 'peasant'. Rose was glad to go home to Tim and Tatty. Sometimes there were things about the old Countess that she did not understand at all.

Going home to Tatty was one of the great joys. He was a small dog, but not so small that you couldn't imagine him to be bigger. Sometimes she and Tim would put him on the end of a long piece of string and run round the garden after him pretending that he was a horse and they were riding behind him in their carriage, just like all the fine ladies and gentle-

men that they saw passing through the Lodge gates. Other days they would run across the fields, jumping over the long grass and making Tatty jump with them. They had as much fun as the colts that raced round the meadows at the back of the stables, and as spring crept into summer they looked forward to the longer evenings and the pleasant thought that soon there would be no more learning to do, but days spent in helping to gather in the harvest and other pleasurable pursuits.

Tim never went up to the big house with Rose, nor did the old Countess seem to be interested in meeting him, even on his birthday.

"Perhaps she doesn't like boys, Rose," said Tim wistfully.

"Maybe," said Rose, and then after a great deal of thought told Tim that it might be something to do with the old Countess having her first little boy go and die on her. "Perhaps seeing you would remind her, Tim. I mean perhaps seeing a little boy like yourself would remind her that she once had a little boy like yourself, and then she wouldn't like that, because older people don't like being reminded of things that make them sad, Tim. They like to talk about things that make them happy. Except for Grandmother, she only likes to talk about sad things because she's such a sad thing herself."

"Grandmother doesn't like us, Rose."

"Of course she does, Tim. Everybody's relations *like* each other, they just have a different way of saying it, that's all."

"No, she don't, Rose, really she don't. She says we're too fine for her, and why can't we speak like her and Father, and why do we have to call her fangled things like 'Grandmother' like gentry or something, and why do we talk more like gentry than normal folk, and she says Mother bringing us up to be like cuckoos, and that Mother's the cuckoo, and that you going up to the big house will give you more airs and graces than is good for you, and that soon it'll be a halfpenny to talk to you, and if you say anything to her direction she'll whip you for being so cheeky. And things like that. Anyway, it don't matter, Rose, because I bit her."

"*Tim.* You didn't."

"Yes, I did, Rose," said Tim proudly, "and then I ran."

"We daren't go home now. Not till Mother gets back," Rose sat up and brushed some strands of grass out of her hair. "We daren't go back," she said again, and then looked at Tatty. "I'm glad we've got Tatty with us, Tim. She might have whipped Tatty because she couldn't find us."

"She won't whip us if Mother's there, will she, Rose?"

"No, but she'll say to Mother about you biting her, Tim, she'll say that all right."

"And Mother'll say that she's sure I'm sorry, and I won't do it again."

"And then Grandmother will say 'ye don't whip 'em enow, ye don't whip enow, 'een gentry'd whip 'em." Rose fell back into the long grass laughing.

"Say it again, Rose, say it again," Tim begged, "that was just like Grandmother."

But Rose was too busy stroking Tatty, and besides that the sun was so fine and warm it made her feel as lazy as a cow.

"Rose?"

"Yes, Tim."

"Rose, do you think our real Grandmother got eaten up?"

"Tim, what *do* you mean?"

"Like in the story, Rose, you know. When Teacher said the other day that the wolf ate the Grandmother up and then got into the Grandmother's clothes. Do you think our Grandmother is the wolf, and our *real* Grandmother, the one God meant us to have, do you think she's really in the nasty Grandmother's tummy, and Grandmother's really a wolf all the time, and if Father chopped her down, our real nice Grandmother would step out? Do you think that's how it really is, Rose?"

Rose didn't think she'd better answer that. After all if God wanted you to honour your mother and father, as it said in the Bible, then He probably meant you to honour grandmothers as well.

Since Tatty had arrived, Rose had become more aware of sin. The thought that God had sent her a dog for her birthday necessarily filled her with gratitude towards Him, but lying alongside that sense of gratitude was the fear that if she didn't keep on the right side of Him, He would take him

away again. Life without Tatty would be unbearable. It was because of him that she now woke up ahead of even Grandmother, and because of him she was always so willing to run any errand that anyone wanted. Running errands were nothing but joy when you had a dog running alongside of you, as he was doing now.

Sometimes when he was running beside her on a fine morning like this morning had been, Rose would wonder why it was that they ever had to stop running, she and Tim and Tatty, and as she did when she was sitting in the old Countess' room, she imagined herself running away with Tim and Tatty, perhaps to find the young man in the picture—running towards what Mother called the 'horizon'. The 'horizon' didn't look like Southwold, it didn't even look as if there were any other villages there, it just looked blue and misty, and the hills that filled it before it became blue and misty were as curved and green as apples.

Once they could see their mother was back in the Lodge the children crept out from behind the neat hedge that surrounded their garden, and feigning innocence of Tim's offence, they walked into the kitchen. To their mutual relief everyone seemed to have forgotten about Tim's offence in the excitement of a parcel having arrived from London for Grandmother—with her name on it—and a great deal of expensive postage.

Rose stared at the wrapping in awe. Imagine that that parcel had come all that way. That parcel had been touched by people who lived in that great city called London. It was unimaginable. Not even Mother had been to London. For about the hundredth time that year Rose wished she had been born a boy like Tim. If she had been born a boy she could go to London and become Lord Mayor, or become a soldier and fight for the Queen. Girls could never do anything exciting.

Grandmother was enjoying her hour of triumph to the full. Rose thought she had never seen anyone unwrap a parcel so slowly, and then again it didn't seem possible that a parcel could have so many wrappings. At last Grandmother reached inside and pulled out the contents. It was a blue shawl made of silk with long fringes. Grandmother's eyes glittered. This

was a shawl that would set everyone back on their heels. This was a shawl that would turn every head in church on Sunday. This was a shawl to twitch and pull, and affect to be unconcerned by. This was indeed a shawl.

Rose watched her father's eyes running slowly over the shawl, taking in all its fine details; the hand embroidery at the corners, the lovely colour of the silk and length of the fringes, and she knew that he was wishing that he could buy Mother a shawl like this. She knew that he was thinking how much better the shawl would look round Mother's fine shoulders instead of draped round Grandmother's hefty frame. Rose felt, along with her father, that if things were as they should be it would be Mother who would be walking to church in that shawl, not Grandmother. Her mother appeared to have no such thoughts. She smiled at Grandmother's delight and re-arranged the shawl for her so that it sat better round her, standing back to admire its effect, and then as she always did, she went back to the stove, happy that someone else was happy.

"I'll warrant that Mabel Burrows'd give every bit of her fine china, and not less, to have a shawl as dainty as this," said Grandmother, and then because the shawl's former owner was an old friend of hers, who had died leaving it to her, Grandmother gave a small sigh and said "Poor Agnes, she must have looked a treat in this, except I always did say she'd not the strength of a fledgling, let alone enough to make a good, strong body."

"It be beautiful all right, that shawl," said John Buck still looking at it wistfully.

"Fit for the Countess herself," agreed Grandmother.

"Yup, that be a lady's shawl all right," said her son, and Rose sitting next to him at the table could almost feel him wishing and wishing for a shawl like that for Lucy. As for herself, she wanted to go and pull it off Grandmother and give it to her mother, but she didn't. Instead she ate up her supper in silence, while planning one day to be as rich as rich could be.

She told her mother this later that night when she came up to kiss her and Tim goodnight.

But tonight she refrained from reminiscing, perhaps afraid that Vilanova's sobs would become louder if she touched on some story from their past, or mentioned Russia. Instead she looked up at Lucy and said, "Lucy—Vilanova is peasant—Rose, your daughter is peasant, but you, you are not peasant. What do you remember from when you were young? Why do you think you speak French like Vilanova and me?"

"I can remember very little from when I was a child, mi'lady."

"You remember your French," said the old lady sharply.

"Yes, mi'lady, but I can't remember learning it."

"So—you are a mystery, Lucy?" The old lady frowned. She didn't like mysteries and she suspected Lucy was keeping something from her.

Lucy was silent, and then sensing the old lady's displeasure, she said, "I remember a large garden, and trees where I used to walk every day."

"Who with? Who did you walk with?"

"A lady who always spoke to me in French."

"And who was this lady who always spoke to you in French?"

"I do not know, mi'lady, but I know that after the large garden I can't remember very much except going in a boat, and then I remember being with nuns, and there was a young nun who was very kind to me."

Lucy stopped here instinctively sensitive to the fact that she might be talking too long, or too much, and thus would give displeasure to the old lady.

"Go on, go on," said the old lady impatiently, "I knew you were not peasant, Lucy."

"I remember the young nun was called Sister Emmanuel. She had a lovely skin, and pink cheeks, and she would give me hot milk, and she taught me English I think, because I don't remember speaking French after that, which leads me to think that perhaps I might then have been in England."

"And after that?"

Lucy looked at the old lady, and a closed expression came into her large grey eyes.

"After that was the orphanage."

"Ah, yes the orphanage, from which you ran away. And then you met the good John Buck, who is peasant, and does not speak French like you."

Lucy said nothing. She was in no position to defend her husband. The old lady patted her hand.

"He is very good, your peasant. You know the day I wondered about you, Lucy—the day I wondered about you was when I heard you speaking French to Vilanova. I taught Vilanova her French so she has a very pretty accent like me, but you, who taught you your pretty accent, Lucy? Your accent is not peasant—so from where, I ask myself? Not from the back streets of Marseilles, no, not from the gutters of Paris. If only we knew where it was, that large garden—then we would solve the mystery that is Lucy, n'est ce pas?"

The old lady patted Lucy's hand again and very soon it was time for Lucy to help the two old ladies to bed. Poor Vilanova was no longer very adept at arranging things for the old Countess, and it was Lucy who had to help them both, while pretending that Vilanova was really doing it; something very necessary for the pride of both mistress and maid.

It was as Lucy made her way down from the back staircase from the old Countess' rooms that Widgery, the butler, stepped out of the darkness and confronted her. No-one at Southwold liked Widgery, that is no-one *below stairs* at Southwold liked Widgery—although the Earl and Countess professed to be very satisfied with him. So far Lucy had had very little to do with him, since her duties mostly took her to the old Countess' rooms, and the old Countess was an eccentric law unto herself; but now he was standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting for her and there was no way Lucy could avoid him.

"Good evening, Lucy, and how is Mrs Buck tonight?"

"Quite well, thank you, Mr Widgery."

"Been looking after the old Countess' interests as is your wont, no doubt?"

"Her Ladyship has just now retired to bed," said Lucy firmly.

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"I noticed that you looked a little pale tonight in the kitchens, Lucy. Nothing the matter I hope?"

"I hope not, Mr Widgery."

"We wouldn't like anything to affect your work would we, Lucy? I mean we wouldn't wish to disturb our interests with the old lady by going and having ill health. Ill health is not tolerated below stairs, is it, Mrs Buck?"

"No doubt it is not, Mr Widgery."

"No it is not, Lucy, it is not tolerated at all. Just remember that, and be so good as to make up your mind to look a little healthier tomorrow. I should hate to have to report anything untoward to the Countess—really I would."

"Yes, Mr Widgery."

"Goodnight, Lucy."

"Goodnight, Mr Widgery."

It was late now, and the moon was up as Rose watched her mother's lantern threading its way through the trees and down the little lane to the Lodge. Grandmother was asleep and snoring, and Father had gone out night fishing with one of the coachmen, so Rose knew that it was safe to creep downstairs and see her mother, even though it was so late, and she just might be cross. She pushed open the kitchen door and saw her mother sitting at the heavy wooden table, but as she saw her she immediately wished that she hadn't—her mother was crying.

To Rose the sight of her mother crying was so terrible that it was almost shocking, as if she had suddenly found out that she wore a wig, or didn't really love her father. She wished ardently that she hadn't made a noise pushing open the door, but she had, and her mother looked up, and it was as she looked up that Rose saw that her mother was not a saint, nor a goddess, but a woman in a grey dress with tear stains and blotches, and a nose that was shining a little too much, and fingers that tore at her poor, much-mended handkerchief.

"Why, Mother—what's the matter?" Rose crept up to her, feeling dreadfully embarrassed, but she managed to put a clumsy arm round her.

"Nothing, Rose dear, nothing at all. At least it's nothing that need concern you—yet."

Lucy began to sob a little more for having said that, and then she suddenly looked up at Rose, and in a way that Rose would never forget she said, "God help us for having been born women Rose, God help us."

Rose shivered. She didn't know why but her mother's words sounded terrible, like blasphemy. Why did her mother want God's help so much? From the way she was looking she knew that it couldn't be for anything very nice.

"I must wash my face before your father comes in," Lucy got up and went to the sink, "you're to say nothing of this to your father, Rose dear, promise?"

Rose nodded, all the time wishing that she hadn't had the idea of coming downstairs in the first place. She didn't want her mother to cry, and she didn't want to keep a secret from her father, that wasn't the sort of thing that happened in their family. In their family—Father was kind and laughed, and Mother was quiet and beautiful—and they never kept secrets against each other, and most of all, Mother never cried.

Lucy patted her face dry, and then sipped a cup of water, and very soon Rose could see the mother that she knew, the only mother that she wanted to know, coming back to life.

"Up to bed now, Rose."

"Yes, Mother."

Rose kissed her, and ran back up the stairs. She hoped that she would soon be asleep, and that when she woke up in the morning what she had seen would turn out to be a dream. Outside, Tatty barked a greeting to Father back from his fishing. Rose closed her eyes. Soon it would be morning.

And soon it was morning, but Rose had to reluctantly admit to herself that what had happened was true and wasn't a dream. She felt embarrassed to go down to the kitchen. She didn't know how to look her father in the face, even to say good morning to him, now that she had a secret against him, although she couldn't think exactly what the secret was. She hoped it was only that her mother had been crying, but somehow she felt that it couldn't just be that. She envied Tim for not knowing anything about secrets.

"Hurry, Rose, we'll soon be off for the haymaking."

Tim peered anxiously round the door at her. Rose threw off the blanket she'd been huddling under and sprang out of bed. At least the morning was fine, and secret or no secret, there was Tim waiting for her, and Tatty outside. She wouldn't think any more, thinking was bad for you. The sort of thing to do in winter, not in summer when the sun was up and the hay was ready to be tossed.

"There's the Fiddys ahead of us," said Tim, matter of factly, as they set off towards the fields clutching some bread for their dinner and a bottle of water. "Yes, them's the Fiddys all right. And there's the Brownlows. Charlie's got an apple. Now he's dropped it. I expect his sister says to him what a fool he is for dropping it. She says that a lot to him, Rose."

"You're an old woman, Tim, you and your gossip, anyone would think you were an old woman."

Tim ignored this criticism.

"There's Mary Brownlow giving Tom a kick," he said with some satisfaction, "there he go giving her a kick back. He can give a good kick can Tom. He kicked teacher the other day, and she went hopping round the room, and then he had to go and stand in the corner. That were the day you were staying behind to help Grandmother, Rose."

"She didn't need any help," Rose remembered with some scorn, "she just don't like us learning to read and write when she can't."

She tied the strings of her sun bonnet under her chin a little more firmly. Haymaking could be a vigorous business, and a girl needed to keep her sun bonnet straight. Once she'd dropped a bonnet in the fields, and someone had taken it. That had been terrible. If the sun got up high you could give yourself a fine headache for a week with no bonnet on.

"Come on," said Tim, "let's get started before them Fiddys."

If they all sang in the fields while they worked, it wasn't because they wanted to make the time go quicker, but rather because this season of the year was for them a time of celebration, and they knew it. Gathering in the harvest, pick-

ing the fruit, all the numerous tasks that needed to be done on the Southwold estate, meant that for a time they would become like one family. So they sang to celebrate their sense of community, and the songs they sang were the old songs, songs they'd heard their fathers and their grandfathers sing—although none the worse for that. And whereas, in winter, they would hurry by each other, huddled into their jackets against the weather, now neighbour smiled at neighbour as they pitched into both song and hay, and when they stopped for their midday dinner they showed each other their provisions and swopped a small piece of bacon with a piece of cheese, or passed a water bottle round from one to the other, those that had manners carefully wiping the top before they took a swig.

By evening the children were half asleep and as it was getting dusk they scrambled aboard the last wagon of hay, Rose still determinedly clutching her bonnet. She looked at the tops of the trees as they passed overhead of them and thought how wonderful it was that it was summer. And then she thought that the noise of the horse's hooves on the road, and the smell of the hay, were the two things which she loved next to Tim and Tatty and Mother and Father.

Grandmother stood at the entrance to the Lodge.

"Quick, Rose, fool girl, quick, your Mother's now fainted and I can do nothing with her."

Rose stumbled into the kitchen, her heart beating. Tim started to cry.

"Hush that noise, boy," snapped Grandmother. And then she said to Rose, "I've been and thrown water and goodness knows all down her, and she still lies there like a fish after a stone."

"Mother," Rose bent over her mother shouting, "Mother wake up, please." But her mother lay grey and still, and Tim's sobs became more pronounced.

Rose put her head down to her mother's heart as she had once seen her father do when old Burrows collapsed at the fair.

"That's the wrong side, child," snapped her grandmother, "anyway her heart still beats for sure."

"Tim, quick run and get Father, he'll be with Mr Coombe in the vegetable garden."

Tim ran, tears still dripping down his hot face. He hardly thought he would have any breath for running after a day in the fields, but fear helps to hasten things, and to his surprise he found his legs seemed to be moving even quicker than when he ran a hot potato race the week before.

Seeing her father bending over her mother and crying out to her was like her mother's tears the night before—something that Rose did not want to witness. She didn't want to see her parents as human beings, or as weak and tearful as Tim and she. She wanted them to be as she saw them, as she wanted them to be. And yet she couldn't help noticing how tenderly her father took her mother in his arms, and how he wiped her forehead and smoothed her hair, and then lifted her up the Lodge stairs to their bedroom. And in doing all these things, she saw how much it was possible for a man to love a woman.

"I've never seen anyone faint out for so long as that before," grumbled her grandmother, "but then your poor mother has no more strength than a goat, and I can't say that I didn't say as much to your poor father when he brought her home. John, say I, marry one of your own kind, marry one who'll bear you good strong children, bring you a good brood into the world. Have nought to do with these weak and watery women. They'll bring you nought but bad luck, mark my words. And so I have said to him, but he bore no more attention to me than if I was the wind blowing through the eaves, and he married her, and now look."

Rose frowned at Tim because he seemed about to repeat his offence against the old lady and bite her again, but when he saw Rose's frown he contented himself with pulling a face at her back. Then a hush settled over the house, and the children sitting opposite their grandmother couldn't hear anything except the silence and the clock ticking, and Grandmother breathing somewhat heavily after her outburst against their mother. Because they had had no previous experience of sickness, the children could not imagine what was going on in their parents' room, but as they were poor people's children

they knew that if their mother was ill it was bad—bad for her, and bad for the house. If a mother could not work the children went short. Rose knew this because the girl next to her at school had had no dinner, because of her mother being ill and not working, and she could only eat when she got home at night, not like Rose and Tim who could take something with them to school, and have something when they got home.

By the time her father came downstairs Rose's imagination had extended itself to nursing her mother back to health, and then taking her on a trip, although how she would pay for it she hadn't thought. When she saw her father's face however, she knew suddenly that her mother had fainted because of something last night, because of the secret.

"I told you, John Buck, as much as ten years ago I told you, that no good would come of this marriage, that a strange woman speaking fangled languages, born away from your own village, would bring you no luck. I told you that, but you thought I was a fool when it was John Buck was the fool. I told you about that, but you knew better as sons will always know better than their poor mothers."

"I think we should make her a hot drink to steady her," John looked wearily away from his mother.

"Hot drinks will never make her into a fine strong woman who could bear you sons, and still be up to go gleaning in the morning," snapped the old lady who, it seemed to Rose, had overmuch respect for 'gleaning'.

Rose knew that the reference to the sons was a slight to her, because her grandmother didn't like girls, even though she was one herself. She said that no-one thought Father was a man after Rose was born, and that it was a good thing that young Tim had followed on eventually, even after all that time, because young Tim had proved that Father was a man.

"Rose will take her mother a drink won't you, Rose?" her father looked pleadingly at Rose, and Rose nodded. "I have to go back to finish off my bit of work."

"I told you to marry your own kind, I told you if you'd married your own kind there'd be none of this hot drinks, and fainting like gentry," Grandmother daubed her eyes with the

corner of her apron as was her custom when she thought she wasn't getting every ear in the room. "I'd have had a dozen fine strong grandsons afore now if you'd heard what I'd said and taken to one of the village girls like any folk with sense."

John turned by the door and looked at his mother. "Well," he said, "happen by next spring you'll have one more grandson, if all goes right, anyway."

CHAPTER THREE

If the state of the weather was important to the Earl and Countess of Southwold, in that it begged the question as to whether or not the Countess needed to wear her furs, it was considerably more important to their tenants. A bad harvest meant a thin winter, and although they did not run the risk of starvation as some small-holders and tenants did, nevertheless the Harvest Supper was considerably gayer if there was a good reason to give thanks.

This year there was every reason to give praise in both church and hall, because the harvest had been good. All was safely gathered in, and the tenants of Southwold gave vociferous thanks for this great mercy, and if the praise that rose to the heavens was louder for the realisation of the feast that was to come, there was no reason to think that the Lord thought any the less of it.

As far as their temporal lord, the Earl of Southwold, was concerned, the fact that there was a good harvest and that therefore the books would balance up nicely for his estate manager, was of considerably less interest than the fact that one of his mother's maids had got herself pregnant—albeit in wedlock. The harvest concerned him in a very distant way, but the maid affected him directly.

The Earl was a peace-loving man. He liked his estate better than he liked London or anywhere fashionable, which was very proper in an earl, except that he didn't like his estate or its acres or its beauties but because it contained the one place where he wanted to be—his library. If Southwold had consisted only of his library he would have been perfectly happy, a fact that his wife was aware of, but which she found hard to accept, particularly when she was feeling irritated by him, which was fairly frequently since the old Countess' maid had become pregnant.

However well run even the largest household, however smooth its workings, it takes only one cog to stick and the whole machine can become, if not exactly ineffectual, at least less efficient. Southwold had become less efficient since Lucy Buck had become pregnant, because she had been frequently unable to come to the house, and the infrequency of her visits made the old Countess cross, and the fact that the old Countess was cross made old Madame Vilanova weep, and that affected Daisy, the maid delegated by Widgery to replace Lucy, and the fact that Daisy got affected made the old Countess even crosser, so that she was extremely short tempered with her daughter-in-law, and consequently the Countess took the Earl to task for his mother's rude manners.

"I can't understand your mother at all. Widgery says that Daisy is most efficient, really most efficient."

The Earl did not answer, hoping perhaps by not answering to make his wife go away and leave him. It had no such effect.

"And I wish she wouldn't speak French to Daisy all the time, Daisy does not understand French, Widgery says. Really Russians are most peculiar. I do hope nothing of your mother has rubbed off on Hugo or Marjorie, really I do."

The Earl moved his finger along the top of the book he was holding in a definitely anticipatory kind of way, as if his finger and not he was dying to get to work and open the book. His wife paid no attention.

"I can't understand this maid getting herself in this condition, she just doesn't seem the type, and then John Buck is such a good gardener," the Countess sighed heavily.

For a second the Earl wondered how John Buck's gardening was going to be affected by his wife's condition, but not knowing very much about these things, he thought it was probably most possible. There was no doubt about it that women's conditions appeared to affect everything. Sometimes he wondered whether they didn't even affect the angle of the sun. He had read somewhere of a very interesting theory to do with women being affected by the moon, and if this was so, there didn't seem to be very much reason why they couldn't also be affected by the sun, and if they were affected by the sun it would appear that they could equally easily affect *it*.

"You haven't heard a word I've just said," the Countess

was looking at him crossly. The Earl sighed inwardly. Ever since the maid's condition had been discovered everyone appeared to be looking at him crossly. Except for Widgery, of course. Thank goodness for Widgery. Widgery was the sort of fellow that you could really lean on. Widgery knew when a person did not wish to be disturbed, and what was better, Widgery was a man and therefore on his side. It appeared that Widgery had even warned this maid against the evils of falling ill, and the consequent effect on the family economy. He had, it appeared, even begged her to consider the soundness of his advice, but she had gone ahead with her foolishness, which was probably how John Buck's gardening had become affected.

The Earl looked up to find the Countess had disappeared. He rang the bell for Widgery.

"Widgery—I wonder if you could assist me on one point?"

"Mi'lord?"

"Why do they always call for hot water when women are having babies? Why, Widgery? For what reason is there this constant need for hot water?"

Widgery gave the matter his consideration, and then after a lengthy pause, he said, "I'm afraid I do not know the answer to that particular question, mi'lord, but I will endeavour to find out for Your Lordship."

"Will you, Widgery? Good. Nothing indiscreet, mind, but please make some enquiries. It is, if I may say so, something that has caused me considerable puzzlement."

The Earl opened his book and lovingly smoothed the first page, much as a tired man runs his hand over a crisply laundered sheet before stepping into bed. Widgery, knowing the signs, withdrew.

Outside it was beginning to snow. He checked that the fire in the music room was burning well. The Countess liked to take tea in the music room during the winter. As he drew the strings of the heavy velvet curtains he noticed a small figure hurrying towards the house, dwarfed by the great cedar trees on the lawns, and looking against the blue light of the snowy evening, like a small grey animal struggling against the elements. Widgery frowned. Lucy Buck getting herself

into a condition had caused enough trouble without her children coming up to the big house to bother people.

"Be off with you, child, we don't want to see you here," Widgery stood in the entrance to the doorway and gestured to Rose to go away. "Be off I tell you, your family's caused enough trouble here, go away."

Snowflakes formed on Rose's eyelashes, and settled on her nose, but she was so cold already she barely felt them. Grandmother's grey shawl was nice and long on her, but it had holes in it and wasn't really very warm against the snow.

"Please, Mr Widgery, Daisy said I was to come and see the old Countess, sir, I mean Her Ladyship that is. Daisy said to come," she finished lamely.

"Daisy has no business sending you messages," Widgery frowned, and half-closed the door, as if he were rationing how much warm air he would let out into Rose's path. He thought for a moment, and then quickly realising that if Daisy had sent for the child, then it must be on orders from the old Countess, he opened the door again, and Rose stepped thankfully into the shelter of the house.

"Wipe those feet of yours and make sure that you make no dirty marks on the floor, or you'll be down on your knees clearing up after yourself, see if you won't."

Widgery stalked off in the direction of the kitchens, leaving Rose to carefully wipe her feet, removing every vestige of snow and dirt on the mat. It was only when she looked up from this task that she realised that she hardly knew the way to the old Countess' rooms. Possibly because on her previous visits she had been so impressed by her surroundings she had kept her eyes down, but for whatever reason she now felt quite lost. She tried to stem the panic that was rising in her throat, but it was difficult. She knew that the old Countess would be waiting for her, and therefore there was no going back, but on the other hand it was very difficult to see how she could go forward, when the house was so very dark, and she did not know the way.

Eventually she inched forward trying to remember the feel of the walk that she had taken with her mother so many times. She remembered that for most of the way the floor was stone, and that eventually it turned to polished wood,

and then it turned to stairs, lots of stairs, and so finally to the big oak doors that led to the old Countess' apartments.

"What in heavens name are you doing here? Widgery, what on earth is this creature doing in here?"

Rose shrank against the wall.

"I thought I heard something, and indeed I was right. What on earth is this creature doing in here?"

Widgery cleared his throat, and when he spoke his tones suggested as much regret as if he had found one of the family portraits slashed, or a piece of Meissen china broken.

"Your Ladyship," he said, "This is, I'm afraid, one of the maid's children. It appears Her Ladyship, the Dowager Countess, sent for her." Widgery's inflection conveyed exactly what he felt about the Dowager's foolishness in sending for the offspring of a maid.

"Yes, Widgery that's all very well, but what is one of the maid's children doing in the State Rooms. If I hadn't by chance heard something moving around—damage could have been done, Widgery, extensive damage."

"Yes, mi'lady."

"Were you trying to steal something, child, were you hoping to steal something?" the Countess tapped her foot impatiently, a characteristic of hers which together with her habit of repeating herself, made the Earl spend even more time in his library than he might perhaps have done had he been married to someone a little calmer.

"No, mi'lady," Rose felt tears were not very far away, but she knew that tears would only serve to make her look guiltier, "Excuse me mi'lady, but I was trying to find my way to the rooms of the old Countess, and I'm afraid I got lost."

"Well you mustn't get lost must you, child? It's a bad habit to get into. Widgery, see this child does not get lost again."

"Yes, mi'lady."

The Countess withdrew into the music room again. Although she knew she was fortunate in having married an Earl, she sometimes wished that she had married someone who liked London a little better. She found her temper was a trifle shorter when she was at Southwold. The days could

seem very long, and it was difficult to keep warm unless you spent most of your time in one of the smaller rooms.

Widgery's hand pinched Rose's arm as he pushed her up the stairs in front of him.

"You take good care you never get lost again, you heard Her Ladyship. You've no business getting lost in this house, do you hear? It's a pity your mother didn't lose you. There—" He pushed her in front of the now familiar carved oak door, and left her. Rose wished she could have bitten him like Tim had bitten Grandmother, but biting butlers was not in the general scheme of things. Not that is, if you wanted your father to keep his job. A good butler was not easy to come by, and everyone knew that Mr Widgery was a great favourite with the Earl and Countess, and however much the Countess might admire Father's display of flowers, and however much the Head Gardener might value his way with roses, John Buck was easily replaceable. There was no doubt about that. Father often reminded Rose and Tim of this fact himself, just to make sure they were appreciating his luck in being the Earl's Lodge Keeper, and allowed to garden on the estate.

"We'd be out like that," Father would say snapping his fingers, "and we'd have no home, and no fire and nothing, that's what would happen if we caused offence."

Rose shut her eyes. She hoped, goodness she hoped, that she had not caused offence. If she had caused offence and Father got his dismissal because of her, she'd kill herself. Throw herself into the river like a girl years ago that Grandmother had told her of.

She knocked gently on the door, and stood waiting. She knocked again eventually, remembering that the two old ladies inside were a little deaf and possibly couldn't hear her inoffensive little tap.

"Ah, there you are, Lucy's little peasant child. Come here and sit by an old woman."

Rose sat on the little embroidered stool that had been so familiar in the days when she came up to the house with her mother. She found the heat of the fire, and the kind look in the old lady's eyes almost unbearable. Somehow everything

had been so wonderful before Mother had got herself into a condition, and now nothing was wonderful.

"How is your mother, little one?" asked the old lady in her funny accent.

"She is not well, Your Ladyship."

"What does she say?" asked Vilanova.

"She says she is not well, you old fool," snapped the Dowager Countess. "She has the baby soon, I think?"

"Yes, I think so," agreed Rose.

"Is there an old woman to be with her, to help with the baby coming?"

Rose nodded. The midwife in the village was coming up to help Grandmother. Rose remembered her coming when Tim was born. She had no teeth at all, and she had slapped Rose for getting in her way.

"Vilanova—bring the child a biscuit."

Vilanova extended Rose a box of biscuits, and Rose very politely bit into it. The walk through the snow had made her even hungrier, and she would have liked to have stuffed it into her mouth, but she was determined never to let her mother down. Her mother always ate delicately, like a lady, not like Grandmother and Father who gobbled their food.

"You look thin, child," the Countess peered at Rose. "That shawl is too thin for this weather, and you are too thin."

Rose said nothing. There was very little to say. She knew she was thinner, and so was Tim, but then without Mother's wage there was bound to be less to go round.

"Have you a pocket?"

Rose nodded, and the old lady gave her some biscuits to put in it.

"Thank you, Your Ladyship."

"That's all right, little peasant. And here, something for your mother," she handed Rose a basket, "women do not feel good when the babies are coming, so I have made them put some delicacies in there for her. She will not feel like heavy English puddings. Tell her to get better soon, there is an old woman who misses her. Now go quickly, before Vilanova starts crying."

Rose knelt quietly by her mother's bedside. She knew that she should leave her sleeping, but she was so excited about

the Countess' gifts that she couldn't wait to see her mother's face. Perhaps when she saw the contents of the basket, perhaps she would wake up and look like she used to do before she had her condition?

"Look, Mother, just look, chicken and bread and all sorts. The old Countess said it would help to make you feel better, and she gave me a shawl instead of Grandmother's old one because it had so many holes, and this one has no holes at all. Look, it's so warm you hardly notice the cold. You can have it when you feel better, because I don't really need it."

Lucy opened her eyes, and looked at her daughter. Something of the despair she felt left her when she saw Rose's little pale face so happy and excited. She sat up and looked into the basket. The old lady had made Cook pack up what to her was merely a light snack, something that might fill a small corner just before you retired, or carry you through from breakfast until lunch, but to the Bucks, and to Rose feeling very hungry after her walk, it was a feast.

"Eat, Mother, please. You haven't eaten anything for so long," Rose pleaded, and her mother ate a little chicken.

"You and Tim have the rest," said Lucy.

"Yes, we will, don't worry," Rose pulled the blanket round her mother, and wished for the hundredth time that she would get better. Although she had a bump where the baby was, she looked so thin, as thin as the thinnest stick, and as white as when you peeled it.

Rose put the basket of provisions on the kitchen table, and gave her grandmother as fierce a look as she dared.

"This is for Tim and Father," she said warningly, "the old Countess sent it for Mother. Now she's eaten what she wants—Tim and Father are to have what's left."

"Who says who is going to have what food now? Airs and graces, that's what you're made of, like your poor mother. Happen they've not got her very far, eh?" Grandmother snatched the basket and delved into it.

Rose sighed. It was awful to see how greedy Grandmother was, but then she was very old and perhaps old people got hungrier. Lately she herself hadn't had much appetite for what little there was. Like her father she just wanted everything to be over. Soon. The possibility that any minute now

there would be a baby to look after never occurred to her. She could only think of her mother getting better and everything being like it was before, with her and Tim and Tatty waiting by the hedge to see her coming across the lawn. She heard Tatty barking and knew her father was back. As usual he didn't wait to take his hat off, but went straight up to her mother. It seemed all he wanted to do at the moment—just come in and go straight up to be with Lucy. And then Rose would take him something up to eat, and he would sit with Lucy all evening. Sometimes when Rose came to get his plate, he would be sitting holding her hand while she slept, and sometimes he would be reading bits aloud to her from her Bible.

Tonight he went up to the bedroom as usual, but was quickly down again.

"Mother—Rose—quickly, something's happening, she's having pains."

Grandmother dropped her chicken leg and stared at her son, "But son, baby's not meant to be here for another while yet."

"It's coming, I tell you, it's coming."

"I told you nought good would come of this marriage John, no strong baby be early."

"Rose, run for Granny Page, quick, Rose."

Rose snatched up her new wool shawl and ran out into the snow. It was over a mile to the village and the snow was getting thicker on the ground, but she was running as if it was spring and she was a colt trying out her legs. Occasionally she stumbled because parts of the road to the village were uneven. By the time she found herself outside Granny Page's door her dress and shawl were soaked.

Granny Page peered round the door at her.

"Yes?" she said, only it didn't sound like 'Yes' when she said it, because she had so few teeth.

"Mother's started," said Rose, "Father says can you come quickly."

"Tsh, it's always come quickly when there's a baby on the way," mumbled the old lady, and shuffled back into her kitchen for her old cloak hanging behind the door.

Her little cottage smelt strongly of broth, and as if she was

in the habit of staying in bed a great deal and not changing the linen. She took such a long time fetching her cloak that Rose peered into the kitchen doorway to see if she was really coming, or perhaps had forgotten that Rose was there. The old lady turned quickly when she saw Rose.

"Be off," she snarled, "be off."

Rose withdrew into the snowy street. Granny Page was hiding her money.

When she eventually ventured through her front door, Rose realised that she would be lucky if she got her to the Lodge at all. Granny had no boots on, and her feet were so swollen that even the slippers she was wearing had difficulty fitting her feet. The only good thing about her was that she was so stooped and old she had a natural protection from the snow that drove at them. Rose gripped her firmly by the arm, if she could only get her to the Lodge before her slippers gave out, all would be well.

They struggled together against the snow storm. There was no running now, because the wind was so strong even a cart-horse would have had to push against it. As it was, Rose and Granny struggled together against the weather like two small animals, only unlike the animals they could not shelter under a hedge, or find refuge down a burrow, they had to keep going. Ever after, when Rose looked back on that night, she often wondered how she did keep going, because Granny seemed to grow heavier and heavier, and slower and slower, with each small step, until they seemed in the end to be moving along in matters of inches, not yards. Indeed if the road from the village had not led past the Lodge, she doubted whether she would have been able to find her way back, so snow-covered had the landscape become, and so crouched against the weather were the two of them, that even when the Lodge did eventually come into view, it was only when they were practically upon it, that they could look up and see it.

Grandmother opened the door. She and Granny were old acquaintances. Granny had delivered every baby in the village.

"The water's boiling, Granny," said Grandmother, who had put on her best apron to make it seem that she always wore an apron with lace in the house, but for the first ten

minutes of her arrival Granny appeared impervious to either aprons or anything else, and sat perched on a kitchen chair like a squirrel, occasionally blowing on the fingertips that stuck out of her mittens like claws.

Rose and her grandmother gazed at Granny. They knew they couldn't hurry her upstairs, and what was worse they knew she wouldn't be hurried. There was a saying in the village—"two things be not hurried, spring nor a midwife." Granny said 'Tsh' several times as was her habit. From the way her grandmother re-acted to this Rose thought that perhaps this was a good sign.

After some minutes the old lady looked at them. "I'll be up then," she said, and then when the other two brightened visibly at this statement, she added, "when I've had a cup of soup."

Rose watched her sipping the bowl of soup, and wanted to tip it over her. Although she had no teeth, she appeared to chew the soup as if it was bread, and the chewing process took a long time, a very long time. It seemed impossible that anyone could take so long to drink a cup of soup, when someone was upstairs having a baby.

Eventually Granny eased herself off the wooden chair, and like a caterpillar unfurled herself slowly. Rose hoped that, like a caterpillar, she wouldn't quickly curl up again. By the look of her she could easily—but she didn't. Instead she crept forward towards the door that led to the stairs, her sodden slippers making a scraping noise along the flagged floor. Grandmother followed her, carrying the first of the buckets of hot water that were to make their way up the stairs throughout the night.

Rose went in search of Tim. She knew his nature, and that she would find him hiding somewhere. He had become so quiet since their mother had been ill. Sometimes she would find him sitting with Tatty in his kennel, sometimes he'd be in the little box room with some of his snails. Tonight he was in the box room, with Tatty.

"Tim, you shouldn't have Tatty in the house," Rose whispered to him, because she was afraid someone might hear, and come up and throw Tatty out into the snow again.

"He was so cold outside, Rose," Tim looked at her plead-

ingly, and went on stroking Tatty. "You were cold, weren't you, Tatty?"

Tatty looked from one to the other of them, and gave a nervous yawn.

"He's afraid you're going to put him outside, Rose," Tim translated, "he's afraid you're going to put him back in his kennel—where he's so cold."

"Tim, what's this?" Rose held up a crust of bread, "you've not been feeding the dog bread, Tim?"

"Yes, I have, Rose," said Tim almost proudly, "he can't catch so many rats when there's snow, and he keeps getting hungry at the moment."

"I know, Tim, but you can't give him our bread, Father'd whip you if he found out."

"I don't care, I like Tatty better than anyone—except Mother," said Tim defiantly, "and he hasn't been having much to eat. And that was my bit of bread I gave him, so it don't make much difference."

Rose stroked Tatty. The way he looked at you, you'd almost think he understood every word you said. It had been a hard winter for the poor little dog, and yet he seemed just as cheerful as ever. Still ready to play at a moment's notice, and Tim was right, if they gave him their bread it was all right. She stiffened suddenly, and Tatty pricked his ears.

"What was that Rose?" Tim had gone quite white.

"I don't know, Tim," said Rose quickly, although she did know.

"There it goes again, Rose."

"Block your ears, Tim." Rose pushed Tim's head down, and she blocked her own ears.

It was terrible to hear a woman groaning like that. She'd once heard it before when Tim was born, but that had been during the day so she could run outside and hide until it was all over. Tonight there was nowhere where you could get away from the noise. She felt trapped by it, just like the time when she got trapped in the hay loft when they were playing near the stables, and they'd brought a stallion in to visit the mares. She hadn't seen anything, only heard him squealing, and the grooms shouting, and just like at this moment, not even blocking her ears had kept the noise away.

"I wish she'd stop," Tim started to cry, and Rose put her arm round him.

They stayed up in the box room all night, huddled together with their dog, and being children they eventually fell asleep. When they woke it was morning, although still dark, and they were stiff and cold. Downstairs they could hear a cry which even they knew to be a baby.

Rose looked at Tim and for the first time it came to her that this was what it was all about, having a baby meant—having a baby! About the same time that this realisation was making itself known to her, Tim appeared to be having the same idea.

"That's a baby, Rose, Mother's had her baby."

They pushed each other in their eagerness to get down the stairs, and even forgot to smuggle Tatty out again, so that they all ran into the kitchen at the same time. Their father was sitting at the table. He looked up as they came in, no expression of joy or celebration on his face, only a grey, unshaved look that made him seem unfamiliar.

"What's that dog doing in here?" He pointed accusingly at Tatty, "get it out of here. Get it out, I'm telling you."

He picked up Tatty, opened the back door and threw him out into the snow.

Rose and Tim stared at him, and then Tim went to the back door and let himself out.

"Where are you going?" shouted his father, "come back in here."

Tim stayed outside. Rose knew that he would be sitting with Tatty in the kennel.

"Shall I make you something, Father?"

She hardly spoke above a whisper, because she felt so frightened. She didn't know why, but she knew something terrible had happened, because Father loved Tatty, and he was never cruel and he never drank anything, and now that she was standing near him she could smell that he had been drinking and smelt like the grooms did on a Saturday night.

"What's the matter?" Her father stared at her, "stop looking at me like that. You should be happy you've a little brother, that should make you happy."

Rose said nothing, and perhaps because she was silent, her

father suddenly took her hand and pulled her near. He looked at her so desperately she wanted to run away.

"It's Mother, isn't it?" she asked.

Her father nodded, and his large hand wrapped round hers felt as if he was about to break her fingers, so tightly was he holding on to her.

"I'll go up to her, shall I?"

Her father shook his head. Rose thought for a minute, and then she knew that the best way to deal with this moment was to pretend that she was her mother. At a moment like this Mother always moved calmly, and thought about other people. She might not be quite eleven yet but she could pretend she was. She let her father's hand go with difficulty.

"You sit there, Father, and I'll go and see if I can do something."

Her mother's room was dark, because the two old ladies were too busy cleaning up the baby to notice Rose slipping into the room. She knelt beside her parents' bed, and when she saw how pale her mother was, as pale and white as the snow outside, Rose wanted to scream. She didn't want her mother to be pale and white, she wanted her to be walking across the lawn towards her on a spring day, or asking her the names of flowers, she didn't want her to be lying there like something carved on a tomb. Rose slipped her hand into the one that lay on the patchwork quilt. She hoped that her mother would turn and smile at her and get her colour back if she felt one of her children's hands in hers. But she didn't turn or smile, and Rose felt that she didn't even know that it was Rose holding her hand, or even that anyone else was in the room, or even that there was a room that she was in.

"What will you be doing here, child?"

Grandmother frowned at her from above the bundle of shawls that was holding the baby.

"I'm being with Mother," said Rose.

"This is no place for children," Her grandmother looked at her uncomfortably, "you'll do best to take Granny Page home now it's getting lighter."

"Well, you've a fine grandson there," Granny Page mumbled

as the old ladies went down the stairs, "but by the look of the mother you'll be needing someone to feed him for you."

"Mother, it's Rose—please wake up Mother," Rose shook her mother's hand as strongly as she dared. "Please don't die, Mother, please."

As if to encourage her hopes Rose suddenly noticed her mother's lips were moving, although her eyes were shut. She couldn't understand what she was whispering. She thought it must be something in French. She didn't want her to know that she couldn't understand what she was saying, so she stroked her hand as if she did.

Her grandmother came back up the stairs, and shook her by the shoulder, "I told you this was no place for children," she whispered to Rose, "now be off and take Granny Page home."

Rose turned on her grandmother.

"You or Father take Granny Page home," she said so fiercely that even her grandmother took a step backwards.

"Your father's not well, and I'm old," grumbled Grandmother.

"Father's been drinking, let him take Granny Page home, it'll do him good. I'm staying here with Mother, and you mind Tim and the baby."

Rose turned back to her mother, but not before she saw that Grandmother was looking at her oddly, as if she had suddenly changed, or as if she had only just seen her.

Rose stayed holding her mother's hand, until her father came back from the village. Then she went to fetch him.

"I think you should shave yourself Father," she told him, "Mother wouldn't like to see you like that."

Her father didn't appear to hear what she had said, but sat down at the table.

"Give Father some water to shave himself, Grandmother," said Rose, and then she said to him a little louder, "where are Mother's beads with the cross on them?"

Grandmother looked up from nursing the baby on her lap. "What do you want with that Popish nonsense?"

"Mother would want them," said Rose.

"They're under my mattress," Tim had crept into the

kitchen and was crouching by the stove, "she lent them me when I was frightened in the storm last summer."

Tim's eyes filled with tears at the memory.

Rose threaded the beads through her mother's fingers, and then knelt beside her parents' bed again. Nothing would make her leave her mother now, but she knew that she would want to have her beads. Mother always held her beads when something happened—no matter what Grandmother said about popery or heathen ways.

When her father joined her beside the bed, Rose noticed with detachment that he had shaved, and no longer smelt of drink. He felt her mother's wrist, and Rose knew this was to make sure her heart was still beating. It obviously was, because he seemed to look a little better after that.

"There's gates to open," Grandmother hissed through the door, and her son got dutifully to his feet. "Is she still with us?" she asked Rose, but Rose didn't reply, and she went down to the baby again.

The snow was beginning to melt as John opened the gates to allow Lady Marjorie's carriage to pass through. Perhaps because the sun was coming out, and she was pleased to be back at Southwold, in spite of the weather, Lady Marjorie leant out of window and called to John, "How's your wife John?" She liked John Buck, ever since years ago when he had given Hugo a black eye for pushing her in the pond.

She looked out of her carriage window, her cheeks pink and healthy against the white of her furs. "I said, 'How's your wife John?' " He appeared not have heard her.

"Sorry, Lady Marjorie?"

"How's Lucy?"

The poor man said nothing, but his face, usually so broad and smiling, crumpled suddenly. "She's dying, Lady Marjorie."

Rose didn't turn as Lady Marjorie tiptoed into the little room. Nevertheless, she knew there was gentry in the room because she could smell perfume, and hear the swish of skirts. Lady Marjorie knelt beside her.

Death is a solemn business, and how long they knelt before it, none of them knew, but eventually Rose felt Lady Marjorie's hands guiding her down the stairs to the kitchen.

"Your mother is dead, Rose dear, you must be a comfort to your father now." The young girl's face looked down at the little girl in front of her, deeply troubled. She looked from the little girl to the old woman who was holding the baby. "That baby will need to be fed," she said quickly, "I'll tell the carriage to take it to the village. Is there someone there who can nurse it for you? Never mind—Mrs Petifor will know. I will take the children up to the house for a meal, they've had a terrible shock, and then I will send the carriage back for you and the baby."

Upstairs they could hear their father sobbing, downstairs the baby cried. The children followed the young girl into her carriage, and although she would have liked to have hugged them to her, she didn't because her furs were very white.

CHAPTER FOUR

The arrival in the hall at Southwold of two of the Lodge Keeper's children was not what the Countess expected. It was not only not what she expected, but she was extremely put out, not to say peeved, by her daughter's manner of return.

Marjorie was not, on the whole, given to whims or acts of emotion, but plucking up children from the Lodge and depositing them at Southwold, was quite obviously not only a whim but also an act of emotion. The Countess didn't like acts of emotion, any more than she liked tenants' children. 'Self control' was one of her favourite words. She always felt that if 'self control' was observed by the masses, which it quite obviously wasn't, then all would be well and they would overcome their difficulties. The case of the maid dying in childbirth was quite obviously a clear example of a lack of self control and looking into her daughter's face she realised that not only was the maid guilty of this—but any moment now it was quite obvious that her daughter was going to be guilty of it too. Marjorie was on the verge of tears, something that the Countess felt she could not appreciate in a returning daughter. However—even though her husband could rarely find a subject upon which to converse with her—she was not altogether stupid, and, after 'self control,' 'dealing with situations' was another of her virtues. She set about 'dealing with the situation' she saw before her.

"Of course the children shall have a hot bath and a meal, dear, I shall ring for Widgery and tell him myself. No, dear, there's no need for you to ring for Widgery—oh very well."

She pursed her lips slightly as Marjorie pulled the bell pull for the butler. Marjorie was becoming a trifle independent lately, no doubt that was how all young ladies became nowadays as soon as they became engaged. The Countess liked her future son-in-law, even though he wasn't as brilliant a match

as a mother could wish for. Hugo said he was very bright, and he certainly had charm, of that there was no doubt—it was just that she hoped that he wasn't filling Marjorie's head with the sort of ideas that she and her father wouldn't like. Sometimes she suspected he was a little bit too liberal to make her quite easy, but then all young men had a few silly ideas about reforming the world and such like matters, when they were young. Happily, when they matured a little they usually found out just how silly these ideas were, and if they didn't—well they just didn't get on in life, and that was that.

When Widgery appeared the Countess noticed that his eyes strayed to the dirty marks the children's feet had made on the marble floor of the hall. The Countess' eyes had also taken in this unsavoury fact.

"You had better send one of the maids to clean up this mess," she said to Widgery, and tried not to betray any emotion when Marjorie interrupted her, and implored Widgery to hurry to fetch Mrs Petifor so that they could comfort the children by giving them a meal, and perhaps a hot bath and some clothes.

"Marjorie," her mother took her aside, "I don't think you should go too far in this matter."

"Mamma—these children have just lost their mother," Marjorie had flung her furs aside and was preparing to follow Widgery, "they have had a terrible shock and need to be comforted."

The Countess watched her only daughter disappearing in the wake of Widgery, and sighed. Sometimes she suspected that Marjorie had inherited more of the old Countess' Russian blood than she actually cared to think about. Giving tenants' children meals, and things like this, were actions that the old lady would be perfectly capable of. It seemed that only a few months ago she had given a perfectly good Sèvres box to someone or another. In fact, when the Countess had inquired after it (since it had been a Christmas present from herself a few years back) the old Countess had merely shrugged her shoulders, and said she had given it away, as if everyone gave away Sèvres boxes on any day of the week.

Lady Marjorie watched the young children eating, and wished she could do something more definite to help poor

John Buck's children. She knew that he had worshipped his dark and slender wife, and she wondered what would happen to the poor little family now that she was gone. Certainly the grandmother was a dreadful woman, forever hanging about as if she wanted to do something—she wouldn't do much to cheer the poor children's lives, and with the father working so much, their future didn't look very bright. Still at least no-one at Southwold was allowed to starve, and at least their father was a favourite with Mamma, thanks to his extraordinary way with roses. His improvements to the Countess' rose garden had definitely done much to protect him when his wife had been found to be indisposed.

"Have we any clothes and things we could lend the children, Mrs Petifor?" Lady Marjorie looked at Mrs Petifor with the firm eye of one who knew that Mrs Petifor would most definitely find some clothes for the children, that is if she didn't want a certain young lady getting very cross with her.

Mrs Petifor recognised the look on Lady Marjorie's face, and quickly replied that there were some old children's clothes that were in quite a good state of repair at the back of one of the linen cupboards.

"There," Lady Marjorie spun Rose round, "how do you feel now? Better? And Tim? How's little Tim?"

Tim stared at her gravely, he felt uncomfortable in velvet, but obviously the young lady thought he looked nice, and obviously she wanted him to smile—so he smiled.

They climbed back into the carriage again, a forlorn little couple in their second-hand clothes. They were tired now, and the new clothes were uncomfortable, but they tried to look pleased because the gentry seemed pleased, so they knew they must be right.

"I hope you're not going to make a practice of bringing home young persons to be dressed and fed, Marjorie?" Her mother looked at Marjorie as sternly as she dared. It was difficult to risk angering Marjorie, young girls did such silly things nowadays. Poor Sarah's girl had eloped to Florence with a painter. The Countess could only thank the Almighty for preserving Marjorie from the attentions of painters.

"Of course I shan't make a *practice* of bringing children home, Mamma," said Lady Marjorie a trifle petulantly,

"those are John Buck's children, and his poor wife is dead."

The Countess thought the less said about the matter, was probably by far the better. Girls who were engaged were inclined to be emotional.

"I wonder where Papa is?" she said, to change the subject.

The children climbed out of the carriage and ran into the Lodge. Just for a minute they had forgotten what had happened, and that their mother was dead. But when they saw their father sitting at the table staring in front of him, they knew that she was and that this was not a bad dream from which they would wake, and then shake themselves like Tatty, but cold day, and the house was as cold as your own bed when you climbed back into it after a nightmare.

Tim began to cry. He looked so pathetic in his funny velvet clothes that Rose almost felt inclined to laugh, but then she didn't. Her mother was dead, and she didn't think she would ever laugh again.

Ted, the undertaker, knocked on the door, and when their father opened it and saw him, it was too much for him to bear, and he ran past him and down the garden. Rose looked at Ted. He was a kind man, in spite of being an undertaker.

"Are you going to take Mother away with you now?" she asked him, as he measured her up.

"No," Ted shook his head, "not yet, not till coffin arrives. Think I've got one that will suit—don't reckon it'll be too much," he added hopefully.

Rose shook her head.

"No, Ted, it mustn't be too much. Father hasn't any money, on account of Mother not being able to work lately." She looked down at her mother. She was glad they weren't taking her away yet.

"I'll come tomorrow. And I'll be telling the Vicar for you, Rose. The lads will dig for you. Hope the weather holds off. And by the way, Dorothy says to tell you that the baby is fine."

Rose looked at him. Of course—the baby.

Ted looked at Rose looking up at him. She was a reflection of the dead woman he had just measured. You'd swear it was her come to life if you hadn't just seen her laid out. Poor John, it must make it worse to see the poor woman's face all around you. Ted shook his head sadly and closed the Lodge

door behind him. He had lost his first wife, and in just such a way. It had taken him a couple of years before he could hold his head up and see what was around him, but when he had —by fortune it was Dorothy's eye that he had caught. Women and babies, he thought as he walked back along the road to the village, they were hard to hold onto, no doubt of that.

The following day they buried Lucy Buck, and the weather kept off. The sun even shone as they lowered her into the grave. John's face was rigid and grey with tiredness and grief. Rose held Tim's hand and that kept him from crying, and grandmother wore her blue shawl, in spite of the cold wind, because she was determined to show it off to Mabel Burrows and the women of the village who had gathered in the graveyard to see the coffin lowered.

Rose looked back at the mound of freshly dug earth, and wondered what they would do for a headstone. She knew that they were expensive, but she didn't dare think how much they might cost. All she knew was that Mother must have a gravestone, with her name on it, and the day she died, because no-one knew the day she had been born. Not even Mother had known that.

"We were lucky it kept from snowing," Grandmother said taking off her shawl.

Rose ignored her, and took Tim up to their bedroom.

"I think you'd better rest, Tim. Mother would say you'd better, you know."

"Yes, Rose."

"I'm going to be Mother now Tim, and I want you to remember that. I'm going to be very quiet in my heart, like she used to tell us to be, so that I can hear her telling me what to do, from heaven."

"Yes, Rose."

"So have a little sleep now, Tim, and then I'm going to find a way to get a headstone for Mother. Mother must have a headstone," she added half to herself.

"Yes, she must, mustn't she, Rose, otherwise we won't know where to find her, will we, Rose?"

"No, we won't."

Rose closed the door.

She sat down on one of the wooden stairs outside the bed-

room, and thought for a long time. She had to have a headstone for her mother soon, or as Tim said they wouldn't be able to find her. The flowers on her grave would die, and the earth would get flattened, and she would get lost.

She couldn't believe that she would never see her mother again. It seemed too easy just to bury someone, and then never see them again. If everything in life was so difficult, as she knew that it was, it just didn't seem possible that death could be so easy. She remembered how often her mother had prayed with them for people who were dead, and she wondered if she should pray for her now? But somehow the thought repelled her. It didn't seem possible that someone so good and beautiful should need prayers. She made up her mind to pray *to*, not for her.

She went down to the kitchen, and found her father and grandmother in the same positions as she had left them. Father just staring in front of him, looking down the oak table to mother's chair as if he expected her to be sitting there sewing, as she always had done. And Grandmother sitting in the rocking chair in the corner not paying attention to anything.

Now that the funeral was over and Grandmother had worn the blue shawl for all to admire, she seemed listless, as if there was nothing around the house that needed doing. This puzzled Rose. Grandmother hadn't liked Mother, Grandmother hadn't wanted Mother or Father to get married to each other, so why didn't she get around and do all the things that Mother would be doing, instead of just sitting in the rocking chair and paying no attention?

"Shall I cut some bread?" Rose asked, but receiving no reply, she too sat down, and eventually fell asleep to the sound of the clock ticking, and her silent family.

An hour or two later Rose woke to her grandmother's voice.

"Gates, John," she nodded towards the window, and John stopped staring, and hurried out into the evening to open the gates.

It was the gates that finally seemed to pump life back into the Lodge again. If neither Rose, nor Tim, nor their father, felt like eating, and if their grandmother didn't feel like cooking, and if the house began to look dusty and neglected

because no-one felt like polishing it, then at least the gates still needed attending. The gates could not be ignored like meals and housework, they had a life of their own, letting in the gentry in their carriages, and the tradesmen from the village, and callers from neighbouring houses. The gates were a witness to the fact that life would go on, inexorably, no matter how you were feeling. It was the gates that prevented John from following his wife, although lying on his side staring at the wall in his empty bed, he was often tempted to run across the lawn and jump into the river, and oblivion.

Rose didn't know that what her father was suffering was not only grief and despair, but terrible remorse. Although she knew, if a little roughly, what the basic mechanics of procreation amounted to, she couldn't associate her mother's death from childbirth with the bitter lines that appeared in his face over the following months. In a way she wasn't interested by the effect that her mother's death had had on the two older members of the family, so obsessed was she by two, to her more important issues—looking after Tim, and finding a way to buy her mother a headstone.

Her grandmother did nothing to help Tim. She seemed to be incapable of looking after him, now that she no longer had a daughter-in-law to grumble at. Now that Lucy had gone, Rose realised what she had always only dimly appreciated, that her mother had run the house single-handed. But she had done it so quietly and efficiently, and so unobtrusively, that half the time she had made it seem as if Grandmother was doing it, whereas now that Lucy was no longer there, it was perfectly apparent to Rose that Grandmother was useless.

Besides dressing herself, and baking the bread, her grandmother did nothing, and, Rose realised, had never done anything. She had been vociferous in her complaint on every subject, loud in her condemnations of humanity in general, while idling away every day that had been given to her. She was one of those people who had made a genius out of doing nothing and making it seem as if it was something; so, every day Rose tried to get a little more done before she went to school. She tried to remember what Lucy would do before she went up to the big house every day. She tried to remember

the sequence in which she had performed all her household duties, and she tried to do them as well as she thought she would have wanted, because Rose felt that her mother was with her and would always be with her. She knew that Tim, because he was younger, had no such feeling, and she knew how much he missed her from the way he cried in his sleep, or would suddenly, for no particular reason, throw himself on the ground and burst into tears.

Sometimes Rose wished that she could cry, but somehow she couldn't. Crying would take up time, and she didn't seem to have very much of that. And then her thoughts were so taken up with worrying about everything. She wondered once or twice if this was what being a grown-up meant? Worrying about whether or not the baby was getting enough, and whether they would be able to save enough to pay the woman in the village who was feeding him. Worrying whether Father's trousers would keep from getting any thinner round the knees, and whether the darns would hold, and whether the embrocation was having any effect on his bad chest. When she went to bed at nights she often found she couldn't sleep because of these problems, but when she did eventually fall asleep it was always in the middle of wondering if they would ever have enough money to buy the headstone.

Possibly, just as the need for the gates to be opened and shut kept her father going, so the thought that her mother lay buried without a headstone kept Rose going. She felt determined that once the headstone was in place there would be an end to her worries and therefore she managed to ignore everyday problems, looking ahead only to the great day when they would see the piece of marble put into place.

When she realised, quite suddenly, how it would be possible to achieve her aim, it was almost a shock. And then, because she didn't want to do what she knew was obviously the solution, she ignored the fact that she had indeed found the solution and pretended that it wasn't really, because it seemed so hard to give up what in her heart she knew she must give up, what she knew could be sold for the price of the precious headstone—her little china box.

She traced the outline of the little blue flowers on the box with her finger, remembering the day of her birthday. The

feel of the cold porcelain, the outline of the decoration, brought back that day as exactly as if she had suddenly rounded a corner and seen it painted in pictures before her eyes. She remembered how much her shoes had pinched on the walk up to the house, and how she had suddenly forgotten all about them in the excitement of actually treading the stairs and walking into the rooms of that unknown species—the gentry.

"Father, you must take this box and sell it in town, and then we can buy Mother a headstone."

"I wonder, would it be your Mother's thought, Rose?" her father looked from her to the box and back again. He knew that his wife had thought of the box as a dowry for Rose. "Besides," he added quickly, "there'll be no-one for the gates."

Rose could see that her father did not realise how important it was to purchase that headstone. She could see that he didn't realise that if they didn't buy Mother a headstone, they would lose her forever, never to find her again.

"Tim and I will do the gate," she heard herself say.

"You can't manage the gates, Rose." Her father shook his head.

"I can't, Father, but both of us could. He could do one, and I could do the other."

"You'd never shift them."

"Yes we would, Father."

"You mind your tongue, girl," grumbled her grandmother, "ideas the like of that, and what would gentry say to children opening gates? Do you want to get your father wrong? Ideas like yours'll get him wrong, and then where'll it get us?"

"Father—how long would it take you—into town and back?" Rose stared at her father anxiously.

"Now, Rose, I'd say half a day—there and back, if I hurried and didn't stop for left or right."

"And how many carriages go through in half a day, Father? One or two, and they're tradesmen. If you went early, Father, you could be back for noon, and no-one would know better. They couldn't know if they didn't see, could they?"

Rose saw that the idea was catching her father's imagination.

"I suppose I could leave before light, be there for opening, and still be back. There'd be no-one in the village with money for this, no doubt of that. You'd have to be in town to get money for this."

"And then we could buy Mother a headstone, such as the gentry have."

"They cost more than an old box," said Grandmother, not liking to see her daughter-in-law doing well—even in death.

"This box is French, Father. French things fetch a lot of money—Mother told me once."

"That's true, Rose, and we could get her something that would make her proud, couldn't we, Rose? So that she could look down and say 'John'—she say 'John—' what would she say, Rose?" John looked helplessly at his daughter.

"She'd say 'thank you, John', wouldn't she, Father? The way she always said it."

"Yes, that's what she'd say."

"You'll go, won't you, Father?"

"I'll go, Rose, I'll go, even if it cost us more than we could give, we should do this for your mother."

Rose knew that he was thinking it might cost them their home, that if he was found out he might be asked to leave the Lodge and they might have to go away from Southwold, but she knew that even this thought wouldn't stop him from going now. She wondered if he realised just why the headstone was so important, and thought he probably didn't. Her mother had once told her that it was up to women to think of things, that men didn't find it so easy to think of things. And she thought this was most likely to be true, because men never seemed to realise when they had holes in their clothes, or if they did they just waited for women to sew them, and very few of them could bake a loaf, or even pick up a baby, although they were strong. It seemed that God had made women to be in the house and think, and men to be strong for lifting and working.

John had little difficulty in rising earlier next morning, since he slept only a few hours at a time. He pulled on his coat and his breeches and crept downstairs.

"Rose, what'll you be doing here?" He stared at his daughter in astonishment. She was the colour of a white wall.

"I was waiting for you, Father, to give you your bread and see you were off."

"I can cut bread, Rose, you should be sleeping. How will you manage the gates on no sleep?"

Rose looked as if she thought this was irrelevant. She gave him the little box, wrapped in a piece of cloth, and watched him put it carefully into his pocket.

"Get the best price you can, won't you, Father? Remember, the best price will buy the best headstone."

Her father nodded. He looked almost forlorn, like Tim when he couldn't think of an answer at school.

"I'll do my best, Rose."

He turned at the door and put one of his large hands on her shoulder, almost weighing her down. "You'll go to your bed now, won't you, girl?"

Rose didn't answer. She couldn't tell him that she couldn't sleep, wouldn't sleep, until she saw the money for the box safe in the hands of the stone cutter. She had waited up all night to see her father off, dozing in front of the stove with her head on the kitchen table, determined that she should see him walking off towards the town with the little box safe in his pocket.

John turned back along the road and unaccountably he found his eyes filling with tears as the little girl waved to him from the Lodge Gates. He thought most probably that the sight of her waiting downstairs for him as her mother used to do had affected him, and that her likeness to her mother most likely always would affect him. Nowadays she seemed to be more like her than when Lucy was alive. Sometimes it made him wish himself to the devil just to see her dusting, or taking care of Tim—doing up his buttons or some such.

He cleared his throat, and quickened his pace. His lantern threw shadows in front of him as he walked. He must walk as fast as he could, walk out, stride out, to bring himself back in time, to bring himself back to the gates and the Lodge before anyone found out and got him wrong. This walk could cost them everything they had, but he knew he must make it, if only for the memory of his love.

"My love is like a red, red rose."

Lucy had once taught him a poem that went like that, and

he had learnt it to please her, although now he remembered only that first line. His love had not been like a red rose. He liked red roses—and Her Ladyship had some beauties—but his favourites were always the white ones. If you looked at a white rose that had just opened, just for a moment you saw something perfect, and then it would quickly become yellow, because it was too perfect to last, and that was like Lucy. Lucy had been too perfect to last. She had been a white rose all right. Her skin so white against her black hair, and that black hair so heavy that when she let it down it covered her down to her waist, and her waist still so trim that you could swear you would span it between just the two of your hands put together.

He frowned and stared at the road in front of him, keeping up the pace he had set himself, and his thoughts swerving away from the direction that they looked as if they might lead him to. There were many things best not remembered. Nowadays it seemed as if most things were best not remembered. He knew that Rose was right about the headstone. If he got that headstone for Lucy, perhaps she would forgive him for what he had done to her. Not that she had once said anything, his white and perfect rose, not once. But perhaps once that headstone was laid in place he could learn to forgive himself a little, although he doubted it.

When he arrived in the town it was light and the shutters were being removed from the shop fronts. He sat on a bench in the main square, waiting for the time to pass. He had some idea of doing business, from watching horse sales and the like, and he knew that should he arrive in the shop as it opened, his price would look low. He must arrive in the shop some time after it had opened, as long as he dared to leave it. In view of the children being in charge of the gates while he was away it couldn't be very long, but it mustn't be obvious to the man that he *needed* to sell the box, only that he *wanted* to sell it.

"Where did you come by this?"

John found his neck reddening, and his fists tightening. Town people had a way of putting things that could get you angered quicker than anyone swearing at you to your face. He

knew the question meant 'where did you steal this?' and he found it hard to answer.

"It rightly belongs to my daughter," he said slowly, "she say to me to bring it to town and sell it for her."

"Yes? And where did she come by it, may I ask?"

"She was given it sir, for her birthday sir, her tenth birthday as it was, by a very generous lady."

"I can believe that."

John's blood raced even quicker when he heard that reply. Why even the very look of this man made you want to floor him. He took a deep breath, but then after he had taken a step or two backwards he thought of how much the headstone meant, and then he thought that folk most like *would* wonder how a man like him came by anything so delicate and ladylike, so he waited for his eyes to see less red and then he said, "I see you are thinking this box might not belong to my daughter, sir. Well it does, it was given to her by the old Countess herself, a great lady, the old Dowager Countess Southwold herself."

The effect this statement had on the man in front of John was ultimately satisfying. For, while at first he thought John was not telling the truth, he finally realised that it would be too easy to check up on a story of this nature. If the farmer, or whatever he was, wanted to lie to him, he wouldn't need to fabricate such a story. Something much simpler would have satisfied.

"Why did the Dowager give your daughter this box?"

"It was her tenth birthday," said John.

The shop owner picked up the box, and looked at it thoughtfully. Such shining simplicity pointed to a very good sale.

Inwardly John heaved a sigh of relief. Now it was up to him to get the best price.

When next he saw his gates again, for knowing them as he did—every shining, twisted, curving wrought iron curlecue—he thought of them as his, his pockets were heavy and his heart was considerably lighter. This evening he would walk down to the village and give over the money to Ted for the tombstone, and soon his beloved would have a monument fit for gentry.

Rose looked at him from the other side of the kitchen. He didn't need to ask her what he wanted to know.

"Only one carriage, Father, and that was a tradesman," she said triumphantly.

John sat down heavily in his chair, and if he could have admitted it to himself, he would have realised that he felt like bursting into tears. All the way back from the town his fear had been that the Earl or Countess would have seen his children dragging those heavy iron gates open, and that they would have demanded his dismissal. Now he was home he could hardly believe his good fortune had held out.

"Someone at the gates, John," said Grandmother.

John got up, and went thankfully out into the cold again.

Rose watched him opening the gates from the window, and she felt a strange excitement at the thought that they now had the money to get the headstone. The feeling she had was not like the excitement before a birthday, nor even like the kind you got when you were on your way to school, but a feeling as if you knew that any minute now, quite soon, you might be going to burst into tears, but not because you felt sad.

"Father—we'll have to write the letters for Ted, he always needs to have the letters written for him."

Rose watched her father eating his supper with some impatience. Somehow he didn't seem very good at thinking for himself. He would have walked off to the village to see Ted and give him the money, and never thought of writing anything out first. Not that he could write, not having been to school like her and Tim.

"Can *you* write what we require, Rose?"

"I might be able to, Father, if you think of what to say."

John stopped eating for a minute, and stared past Rose. There were so many things he wanted to say, if he had the words. If he could write words like 'My love is like a red, red rose', those were the kind of words that Lucy would appreciate. He looked at his daughter. Rose had been to school, perhaps she would know of words that would look good? She had a good way of forming her letters, the teacher had said.

"I don't know if I could write well enough for Ted to

copy. I don't know that I could do it well enough, Father."

"You make good letters, Rose, your mother said so, and teacher say so."

"But not good enough for a headstone, Father. I wouldn't know how to set it out."

"What shall we do, Rose?"

Rose felt everyone was suddenly looking at her, as if she knew the answer, as if they were *sure* that she would know the answer. She knew she must find the answer; after all the trouble they had been to, they mustn't now make a mistake in the letters on Mother's headstone. They could never hold their heads up in the village if they made a mistake. Not that many in the village could read or write, but things got about in a village and it wouldn't be long before someone found out, and then folk might gossip. Rose felt her cheeks going pink at the thought of folk gossiping.

"I know, Father, lets go to teacher, she'll help us. She always says she'll help us, doesn't she, Tim?"

Tim nodded, "Yes, Father, teacher always says she'll help us when we want."

"I daren't, Rose. What'll folk say if I go knocking on teacher's door?"

"What will they say, John?" Grandmother looked grim at the thought of what she knew they would say. Teacher was not young, but she was a woman, a lady most folk would say, and she had no husband.

"I'll come, then?"

"You'll come, Rose?" Her father looked at her puzzled.

"If I come with you, Father, teacher will do the letters for Ted, and no-one can say anything, because I'll be with you."

Rose didn't know why it was important for her father not to be seen knocking on the teacher's door at night, but she knew that no-one did do that kind of thing in their village. Her father was very shy of going on this walk to the teacher's cottage, Rose could tell that by the way he had whistled all the way to her front door. Lamps were lit in the windows of the cottages round them, and Rose stamped her feet up and down to stop them from getting cold, and also to make sure that if anyone in the other cottages had seen them walking up

to the teacher's door, they couldn't fail to notice that Rose was with her father and that he was not alone.

"Good evening, ma'am," John removed his cap.

Mrs Dickinson stared at the man and his daughter. She thought she recognised the Lodge Keeper from Southwold. She looked at the little girl beside him a little closer.

"Rose Buck—my goodness—I didn't recognise you in the dark."

"Good evening, ma'am," John began again.

"Good evening," replied Mrs Dickinson at last, realising that she was facing something in the nature of a deputation, and that being so she must observe the conventions.

"Myself and my daughter, ma'am, were wondering if you could be of some assistance to us?" John had rehearsed his opening phrase on the walk, carefully adopting the style of speech that he knew gentry appreciated.

"I will certainly be glad to give you any assistance that I can," said Mrs Dickinson, much to John's relief, because he had somewhat counted on her replying in this way, and if she hadn't, it would have upset his next statement.

"That is very kind of you, ma'am, and myself and my daughter much appreciate your kindliness—the assistance we require is for the writing out of a headstone, for my wife, Rose's mother."

"Come in," said Mrs Dickinson, opening the cottage door wider for them to follow her into her little sitting room. As she closed the door she thought of how much she had wanted to be a missionary when she was young, and how dull being a teacher had seemed to be in comparison, but now she realised that there was very little difference. After all, it was just as important to bring the Word to the natives of England as it was to the natives of Africa. "What kind of inscription had you in mind?"

John looked down at Rose.

"Father wanted to do the inscription properly," said Rose, speaking for both of them, "with Mother's name, and the date of her death, because she never knew when she was born."

Mrs Dickinson busied herself at her desk and eventually found a nice, white piece of paper and dipping her pen in black ink, she waited for instructions.

"Name goes first, doesn't it, ma'am?"

"Yes, that's right, Mr Buck."

"Well that'll be 'Lucy Buck'—and if you wouldn't mind putting it in big letters ma'am, then Ted can copy what he sees. His reading isn't up to much I'm afraid, ma'am."

Mrs Dickinson wrote out Lucy's name and the date of her death, and then she waited patiently for John to tell her what he would like to put at the bottom of the headstone.

"Perhaps a piece out of the Bible?" Rose suggested.

"But, Rose, lying there near the church she can hear the Bible every Sunday, I was thinking on something more like—poetry."

"That's a very good idea Mr Buck, poetry is most suitable for a headstone. If I may make a few suggestions?" Mrs Dickinson bustled to her bookshelves, and took down one or two items from it. "How about something from Shakespeare? He can be most appropriate."

"Whatever you suggest, ma'am, I should be most grateful."

Valiantly Mrs Dickinson read from her volumes lines here and lines there that she thought might be a fitting tribute to the poor man's wife, but it was perfectly apparent that neither father nor daughter could find satisfaction in the lines she suggested, and were becoming minute by minute more embarrassed by the situation in which they found themselves.

"How about something in your own words?" she suggested eventually.

"Yes, Father, how about something in your words?"

John turned away from the teacher and said in half-whisper to Rose, "what does she mean?"

"Something you might put in a letter," Rose explained.

"I never yet wrote a letter, Rose."

"Well, how about something that you used to say to her. Something she liked to hear you say."

John thought about this, and then he said doubtfully, "I used to say to her she was a great lady, which she was, but then I'm not sure as that would do for a headstone."

Rose looked at Mrs Dickinson, and knew their time was running out. Mrs Dickinson couldn't spend all evening trying to think of poetry for Father to put on the headstone. She had books to look at and lessons to prepare. Mrs Dickinson

didn't only teach them how to read and write and add up. She taught them about kings and queens from olden days, and about far away places where the Empire was, and where the Queen ruled and the flag flew. Mrs Dickinson had been abroad. She had once been to France and eaten snails.

"Let's put something French, Father."

"Rose is thinking my wife would like that, because she spoke French, ma'am," John looked at Mrs Dickinson apologetically. He thought that like the rest of the village, she would probably take a poor view of a man who had married someone who could speak French.

"An excellent idea, Rose, and how about the words, what words would you like in French?"

"The same as Father used to say—'A great lady'."

"How about 'She was a great lady'?"

"Yes, Mother would like that. She liked French almost as much as she liked English, although she never did know how she came to speak it."

Mrs Dickinson dipped her pen in the ink again and wrote "C'était une grande dame."

Ted stared at her piece of paper. Rose and her father looked at each other, and knew with relief that it wouldn't make any difference to Ted whether it was writing in French, or any other language.

"That looks nice all right, John, most nice. I'll do that for you all right, shouldn't take long, once we get going that is."

John and Rose handed him the money with a great feeling of relief. They had almost accomplished their goal. Soon the headstone would be in place.

Now we shan't lose Mother, shall we, Rose?" Tim looked down at his mother's grave.

"No, Tim, we shan't ever lose Mother now."

Out of the corner of her eye Rose saw that several women from the village were standing gossiping at the gate of the churchyard. She knew they were busy saying that Mother was a foreigner and only a foreigner would have strange words on their headstone, because Ted's wife who could read would have told them. She took Tim firmly by the hand. "Come on, Tim, we must catch up Father," she said.

"It looks like a nice bed now, Rose, don't it?" said Tim looking back over his shoulder.

Rose didn't reply, but walked quickly past the little knot of women, pulling Tim behind her. Even the Earl himself had stopped and stared at Mother's headstone before the service, and then turned and said something to the Countess. She hoped there wouldn't be trouble for Father because of it. Poor Father, he hadn't been able to keep from crying when he saw that headstone in place. Up till then, in the excitement of being able to afford it, he had forgotten that his great and wonderful lady lay beneath the ground, but now, this morning, he had seen for himself what he had forgotten was true, and he had walked away from them and wept. And Tim had wept, and she had found it difficult not to cry with him. Only Grandmother had been unmoved, too concerned about everyone seeing her shawl to take in what was written on the headstone.

LUCY BUCK. DIED 1883.

"C'ETAIT UNE GRANDE DAME"

The Earl settled himself among his books again. He was satisfied that the new vicar was the kind of fellow he liked. The sermon had been exactly ten minutes long, just as he had ordered. Ten minutes was long enough for anyone's taste, and in his opinion ten minutes was the exact time it took for people to begin fidgeting. Admittedly his wife was an exception, it took her only about two minutes, but then she tended to be an exception in most things.

Widgery coughed from the doorway.

"Yes, Widgery?"

"About the matter you asked me to enquire about, Your Lordship? The matter of the boiling water?"

"Yes, Widgery?"

"It is used for a great many purposes I believe, sir, including the brewing of tea."

"Really, Widgery. Well, thank you very much, I've always wondered. Seen a calf born you know, never seen a baby. Thank goodness," he added after some thought.

Widgery withdrew. He was glad to see that the Earl did

not take an over personal interest in his servants. Not like his daughter, bringing tenants' children in for meals, or his mother, who appeared to be quite happy to sit and gossip with the maids, in spite of being, so he understood—a Princess in her own country. But then being a Princess abroad was not equal to being even an Honourable in England, everyone knew that. Widgery was glad he had been born British, and he was glad that the matter of the maid had sorted itself out. Just for a minute he remembered how pretty she was, and then he put the thought out of his mind. What was done was done. He sniffed the air. It was gammon and parsley sauce in the servants' hall today—his favourite.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rose stood by the window and watched the carriage passing through the gates, albeit a little slowly, because a carriage drawn even by a dozen healthy tenants will not go at the same speed as one drawn by horses.

The celebrations for Lady Marjorie Talbot-Carey's marriage to Richard Bellamy Esq. were about to begin, but first the carriage was to be drawn up the drive by the tenants, and then there was to be a garden party where all were invited. The young couple had been married in London. There had been a large society wedding, and hundreds invited to the reception, but now Lady Marjorie was bringing her husband home to be introduced to the tenants of her father's estate, and there was to be dancing and fireworks.

It didn't seem to matter very much that Rose's frock was a little too much on the small side to be quite as pretty as she would have wished, or that Tim had a patch in his shirt that showed more than a little—on account of Rose's sewing being no great shakes. Nothing like that seemed to matter. This was a great day for Southwold and everyone knew it.

Rose straightened her ribbon in the looking glass above the kitchen basin and then went upstairs to look at the baby. She looked at him lying asleep on his back. She loved to squeeze him, and kiss him even more than she liked running about with Tatty and Tim. She hadn't run about with Tatty and Tim very much since young John had arrived home, nor had she been able to go to school as much as she had wished, on account of the fact that there was so much to do in the house and Grandmother couldn't be trusted to be left with the baby very often, except if Rose had just fed him and he was sleeping. She tried to feed him just before she left for school so that he might sleep without waking until she got home. And so often she would run home as fast as she could with Tim and

Tatty trailing behind her, because she was so afraid that young John would wake and Grandmother would give him 'something to make him sleep'. Rose knew that you should never give babies 'something to make them sleep', because her mother had told her that it was bad for them.

Young John was just beginning to walk and so the pace at which they set off towards the celebrations was necessarily slow. Rose looked at her two brothers. They were as unlike as they could be. Tim, like her, was as thin as the thinnest stick, and the baby was as fat as Tim was thin. When her father had got the baby and brought him home, they had all stared at him. No-one wanted him. It was hard enough to manage without there being a baby to look after. Grandmother said so, often.

The reason Father had taken it into his head to suddenly go off down to the village and fetch him, was because he had heard from Ben at Southwold Arms that you could leave a baby too long. Ben had told Father that he had been left too long with the woman who was nursing him, and so when his father and a new wife came to fetch him—why he had screamed for days, thinking they had taken him from his own mother. Father was afraid that this might happen to their baby and so he had gone to fetch him.

Young John was ten months old when Father walked in the kitchen door with him. Father, of course, looking as worried as a man could be because he hated to see a woman cry, and Margaret had cried her eyes out when he had taken the baby from her, even though she had two of her own and another on the way. Of course, Father had given her what he could, but she was different from some, and if his last name hadn't been Buck, Father said she would have kept John for her own. But in Father's opinion a child belonged with his family, and with no-one else. He said this several times while Grandmother just sniffed and said several times back to him, that in her opinion she had already too much on her hands without a baby crying for her all day long. And all the while they were talking, poor young John just sat on a chair and looked sleepily at everyone, because it was already dark, and he should have been in bed.

"You had better left him with Margaret," Grandmother

rocked herself viciously in her chair, "a baby is no good for an old woman and a child."

John looked at Rose helplessly. He wanted her to say she wanted the baby, and that she thought as he did, but she couldn't. She couldn't even look at the creature. She didn't want him in the house. She felt the same as Grandmother, he'd have been better left with Margaret.

He started to cry. They all stared at him, but no-one made a sound. Eventually because it was a loud noise and young John seemed quite capable of sustaining it for some time to come, Tim went up to him, and shook his hand up and down. Miraculously the tears stopped, and he smiled at Tim.

"He's smiling, Rose," said Tim, a little unnecessarily.

"He can smile, it's us that'll soon have no smiles," grumbled Grandmother.

"I think he's tired, Rose."

"And what would a bit of a boy know about that?"

"He just now yawned, Rose."

Rose picked up the baby. He was very heavy. She had made a bed out of some blankets and a box to put beside hers and Tim's bed.

"I'll put him upstairs," she told her father, but she wanted to throw him downstairs. She hated babies. They killed women.

Perhaps because he slept through the night beside her bed without stirring, in the morning Rose looked down at her small brother with slightly less resentment than she had felt when she saw him coming through the door in their father's arms. She didn't know what to give him for breakfast, but she thought she would soak some bread in a cup of milk.

"He likes that, Rose," said Tim watching the baby supping up his bread.

Rose looked at the baby thoughtfully. Although she hated to admit it, the fact that he had eaten his breakfast with such relish pleased her. She wondered now whether he would stay on the chair long enough for her to get the house swept, or whether he would cry and make it difficult for her. She knew that there was no point in asking Grandmother to look after him. It was all she could do to bake the bread nowadays. She no longer rose at dawn to be the first down in the

morning, her incentive for doing so having been taken away. There was no point in competing to be mistress of the house, when there was no mistress to compete with. She did nothing except the baking, and even then she made sure that Rose kneaded the dough for her, telling her that her hands were no longer what they were, and the pain got her if she pressed down too hard. Sometimes when she felt very tired Rose would have liked to have bitten her grandmother as Tim had once done.

How she got through that first day with the baby at home was something that Rose could only wonder at. It was as if everything was against her. The washing dropped off the line, and had to be done again. Grandmother burnt herself on the stove, and sat nursing her arm all day and making remarks. Tim didn't come in for his dinner, because Tatty got himself lost chasing rats in the stable yard; and so she worried that he'd hurt himself, and when he arrived home he had—he'd cut his knee and grazed his face, and torn his good shirt that she'd asked him to keep for best. And then just as Father came in, and she thought she had everything to rights, the baby fell off his chair and banged his head on the stone floor, and lay there.

"He'll be all right," said John uneasily as Rose picked him up from the floor, "babies are all right more times than you can say, Rose."

Rose looked down at the baby.

"He's not all right, Father, he's not moving," she announced presently, "quickly bring some cold water, Tim."

She splashed cold water over him, but the head remained very still on her lap. She felt his pulse.

"He's still alive," she told Tim who was standing very close as if he could help her just from standing near.

"Perhaps you'd better take him upstairs, Rose," said Tim anxiously.

"Yes, I'll take him upstairs, Tim. You bring some cold water."

"He'll be all right," said their father again, but he didn't move from the table where he was sitting, and Rose knew it was because he had been drinking and he didn't want her to smell the ale on his breath. She knew that her mother had

hated him drinking, and he was ashamed to say that he did in front of Rose. But Rose knew that he now spent every evening at the Southwold Arms and that was why he sometimes forgot to eat his meal, or fell asleep very early still sitting at the table.

The two children bent over the box that held their brother, and splashed water over him liberally, but the baby didn't wake.

"You keep splashing, Tim, I'll go and warm a blanket, like Mother did once when you fell off the hayrick."

She snatched a blanket from their bed and hurried downstairs, so quickly that she was in time to see her father passing Grandmother a bottle of gin. She pretended not to notice, and went straight to the stove to warm the blanket. Grandmother hid the bottle under her apron and went on rocking her chair, only a little faster.

"I'll stay awake, Tim, you go to sleep."

"I'll wake up when you want me to, Rose," said Tim, but she could see that his eyelids were drooping and he was already nearly fast asleep.

"May the angels keep you safe until morning," said Rose, because that's what their mother used to say.

She looked down at the baby and felt his pulse again. She didn't know how to make him better, but she thought that if she kept him warm, and watched over him, it would help. If water didn't wake him then she would just have to leave him.

"Is he still alive, Rose?" Tim looked at her. It was dawn and he had woken to find Rose feeling the baby's pulse.

"Yes, he is Tim, he's still alive. I've been praying to Mother, and I think she's going to keep him alive for us."

Tim took in this thought for a few moments, and then he said, "you don't think she wants to take the baby to heaven with her, do you, Rose?"

Rose shook her head. "You'd better go downstairs and light the fire, Tim. Father will be up soon."

Tim padded obediently downstairs. He laid the fire very carefully, almost extra carefully, because he was so worried about the baby. It was like a superstition with him. If he laid the fire very well, and drank his milk well, and ate his bread well, and remembered to do all his buttons up in the

right order, and brushed his hair, then whatever he was hoping at that moment would be all right, but if he did one thing wrong then it wouldn't happen.

He went upstairs again.

"The fire's lit, Rose. I'll stay with the baby while you get Father's breakfast."

Because she had seen her father passing Grandmother the bottle of gin, Rose now watched him while he ate. She noticed that he looked older than he used to, and that his hands shook when he drank, only very slightly, but they shook. She knew that when people drank their hands shook in the morning, because one of Ted's brothers had drunk himself to death, and his hands had shaken all the time. So much so that neither Ted nor his brothers would now touch a drop. They were a large family, so that the matter of their giving up ale somewhat affected the Southwold Arms, and Ben would grumble to anyone that would listen that the profit he made from that one brother had been washed away by his death. Ben had had his eye on one of Ted's sisters for a long while now, so that it was thought that it would have been wiser for him not to grumble. But it was not in Ben's character to keep quiet. Any more than it was in her father's character to lie, as he was doing now.

"I might have to go to the village for a new pair of boots some time today, Rose. Will you and Tim be able to watch the gates—with the baby as he is?"

"Yes, Father."

Rose watched him going out of the door. He had brought the baby home. He had given him to her to look after and now young John was ill, all he wanted to think about was 'going out'. She washed up his dishes and laid out breakfast for Tim. It was the way things were. She remembered her mother's face when she had said 'God help us for having been born women', and shivered as she had done then. It was terrible to be a woman, not just because you had to do everything in the house as well as your work or because you had to have babies and die, but because it was terrible. The Bible said it was because Eve had tempted Adam with the apple, and Rose knew that this must be true. Women suffered because the first woman had been wicked. Men could be as

wicked as they wished, but they would never suffer as women did because Adam had not been wicked like Eve, and, Rose suspected, because God was a man.

Rose and Tim took it in turns to sit with the baby all that day. Grandmother slept late, and when she awoke she was extremely cross, and it was all they could do to keep her from bothering them with the least thing. She, who had always said she would be so proud to have grandsons, seemed unmoved by the fact that young John had not woken since his fall. She grumbled to Tim that Rose hadn't cooked the potatoes properly, and she wished that they could have cream on their fruit every day of the week the way that farmers' wives did.

"I wish that Grandmother had fallen off the chair, Rose," said Tim.

Rose didn't reply. Although the baby was still alive, now that it was getting late and it was a full day since he had hurt himself, they both felt that there couldn't be much hope.

"Wouldn't you like to go to sleep now, Tim?"

Tim didn't appear to have heard.

"Where's Father, Rose? Why does he go to the village so often?"

Rose thought for a while, and then she whispered, "I think he's drinking, Tim. I saw him give Grandmother a bottle of gin only last night."

Rose saw that Tim was too young to appreciate the significance of this remark, so she pulled the blanket over his shoulders and settled him down. Outside the latticed window she could hear an owl hooting. Inside the baby breathed regularly. That at least was something.

"Tim! He's woken! Tim! He's crying!"

Rose cried too.

Tim looked so frightened at her sobs, she tried to calm herself. She rocked the baby. She hadn't cried since her mother had died, that had been something that she'd been proud of. Even Grandmother had cried at the funeral, but Rose hadn't.

"Look, Rose, he's smiling."

They stared at their little brother lying on the pillow in the candlelight. He had stuck his fingers in his mouth.

"Perhaps he's hungry."

Tim crept back up the stairs with a cup of milk and some bread for the baby, and a piece of cake each for them, "I brought something for us too, Rose, something to stop us feeling so hungry. Grandmother's eaten what we left at supper. She says old folk need it."

They fed the baby, and they ate their cake, and then too happy to move him, they fell asleep beside the baby, and in the morning Rose realised that she did like babies after all.

"I'll whip who took the cake," said Grandmother.

"No, you won't, Grandmother," said Rose, "You won't whip anyone."

"See if I don't."

"Tim and I ate the cake, because we were hungry from watching over the baby."

"I'll whip the pair of you."

"No, you won't," said Rose again, and quickly picked up the baby because her grandmother looked as if she was going to hit her. Tim ran behind the table. "If you touch Tim, I'll tell Mrs Petifor that you drink gin," Rose heard herself say.

When she saw the effect it had on her grandmother, she wished she hadn't heard herself say it. She went quite white, and picked up a spoon to hit Rose with. Rose joined Tim behind the table, still clutching the baby.

She knew that her grandmother was immensely proud of her growing friendship with Mrs Petifor, and that the housekeeper was a person who never touched alcohol, as she had heard her remark this to Father once.

Just as suddenly as their grandmother had seized the wooden spoon, Rose and Tim watched her drop it. She started to cry, dabbing her eyes with the corner of her apron. She cried because she said she missed 'their dear mother', and then as the children remained where they were, she cried because she said an old woman needed a little comfort in the evenings, and then she cried, very loudly, about the fact that her friendship with Mrs Petifor was only for Rose's good.

"Why Grandmother, whatever do you mean?" Rose came up to her still clutching the baby.

'For your good, so there'll be a post for you at the house, when you're ready." Grandmother renewed her sobs, and Rose put the baby down, and turned to comfort her.

At that moment the wooden spoon came down so hard against the side of her face that Rose nearly fainted with the suddenness of the pain. Then as she felt the spoon come crashing against her head again and again, Rose knew that her grandmother was wicked, as wicked as the devil. More wicked than the devil. She resolved to hate her forever.

It was surprising how effective that resolution was. Even Rose had been surprised at how deep her despite for her grandmother became, and how much Rose's emotion affected the old lady. Today Grandmother had gone to the village to fetch her friend, Mrs Burrows, for the celebrations. Mrs Burrows' legs not being what they were she was better walking with someone to lean on. But even today Rose was glad to say she had managed to make Grandmother uneasy by merely polishing the kitchen floor so hard, and making it so shiny, that Grandmother had been forced to walk about in her stockinged feet all morning. A fact that she hated because she was afraid that someone might glimpse her shoeless feet from outside.

With the amount of traffic that had been through their gates since early morning, it was highly possible that someone, if only a coachman, had glimpsed her feet through the open doorway. For Father left their door open in order that he might run out as he heard a new arrival and open the gates and bow as the Countess liked him to do, and then close them again; and of course no sooner had he closed them than he had to run out again, but the Countess insisted that everyone arriving at Southwold should be accorded the same welcome. 'Southwold starts at the gates' she was in the habit of remarking to John, and John, because he loved his gates as much as he was currently prone to loving his ale, heartily agreed with her. And of course he liked to see who it was that was arriving as much as anyone. He had helped to pull Lady Marjorie's coach on its nuptial ropes, he and Ted and all Ted's brothers, except the one who had died.

When they rounded the corner of the hedge, the sight of the marquees and the tables on the big lawns, with the cedar

trees towering over them, was no surprise. All week they, and especially Tim, had watched the preparations for the great event. The footmen raising the tents under the supervision of Mr Widgery, the maids hurrying to and fro in their white hats and aprons bobbing in and out between the trees, the labourers banging posts into the soft green turf, and everyone hoping for as fine a day as they had got.

"Here they come!"

The cry went up, and the assembly of people gave a great cheer as they saw the young couple make their way across the terrace and down the wide stone steps, preparatory to shaking hands with everyone. Mr Widgery gave a sign, and the Earl's farm manager stepped forward and read an address.

"Your Lordship, Your Ladyship, Mr Bellamy, sir," he began, and then stopped. He was so pleased to have managed this first sentence, that he looked over the top of the bound and illuminated address, and smiled for no reason other than the satisfaction of having effected this first difficult sentence without mishap.

There was a shuffle among the audience. A general settling into the substance of what he was about to say. And approval, albeit silent, that he had managed to cope with this first difficult sentence without letting the village down.

"He'll be all right now," said Ben, the landlord of the Southwold Arms, to no-one in particular.

"It was with the humblest and greatest of gratitude that we heard of Her Ladyship's betrothal to the honourable gentleman present, Mr Richard Bellamy, Esquire. The villagers and members of Your Ladyship's parish could not have been more overjoyed that Her Ladyship had chosen to become united in marriage to such a fine and honourable gentleman."

"He's taking the long route round, to be sure." This was Ben again, and no-one cared to disagree with him.

"Your Lordship well knows that your humble tenants and parishioners hold the good health and happiness of Your Lordship's family before all else, and Your Lordship must know that this—" he hesitated here because he had to turn the page, "Your Lordship must know that this before all else

is the subject of Your Lordship's humble tenants, and parishioners' dearest concern. And—"

There was not a person present, including the Earl and Countess and the bride and groom, who had not by now noticed that the manager's address was only just begun. Thoughts flew off in all directions, and returned with relief when he finally stepped back and bowed, and everybody realised it was over. Much as they all felt many of the sentiments expressed in the address quite fervently, and perhaps a little more fervently than was their wont because everyone could smell the ox that was roasting on an open fire somewhere to the side of one of the marquees, nevertheless being forced to stand and listen to an address is a very dull business at the best of times, smacking too much of the Sunday sermon, and too little of the sense of celebration that they all undoubtedly felt at the sight of two such fine young people having been joined in wedlock.

On occasions like these every child, and every man and woman, felt that what happened to the Talbot-Careys happened to them, and of course it was true. However big the estate, and Southwold was not small, nevertheless the sense of belonging to each other was very strong. If Lady Marjorie looked radiant, there was not a farmer, nor a labourer, who wasn't feeling that it was 'his' Lady Marjorie, 'their' Lady Marjorie, who was looking radiant. She was as much theirs as their own daughters, and she belonged to them as much as their farms and their cottages belonged to her family. Many of them felt, like the Countess, that she could have made a more brilliant match. But like the Countess also, they were thankful that she had married such an evidently charming and handsome man, who would go far and no doubt carve out a name for himself, notwithstanding the fact that he was not as well-born as his wife.

The preparations for the wedding celebrations had caused Mr Widgery some headaches, although he would not have admitted it to his dearest friend, if he had one. The question of the clemency of the weather had caused him to toss and turn at nights more than somewhat and he had prepared his two plans of campaign according to the state of the elements. The first plan had been to enclose the terrace in tenting so

that in the event of its raining, Lady Marjorie and Mr Bellamy could have made their appearance and listened to the address in the safety of a covered place. And yet there could have been no question of the tenants penetrating the main house, so the marquees would have had to have been linked and the enclosure on the terraces could have been kept for the gentry, while below the steps the farmers and labourers and their families could have enjoyed themselves, while staying at a safe distance from the quality.

Mr Widgery had been very glad that the weather had turned out to what it was, sunshine, and not a cloud in the sky, because he had had not a few nightmares about 'plan one'. Being the kind of person who disdained to court favour among the lower ranks, he naturally had an overriding fear that one day they would 'get the better of him'. People 'getting the better of him' was one of Mr Widgery's dreads, together with finding a spider in his bed. The trouble to his mind about 'plan one' was that it brought the common people too near to the steps of Southwold for his peace of mind. It brought them almost within breathing distance, and that had been one of his nightmares, that they would become uncontrollable, and rush the steps of Southwold, like all those common people during the French Revolution. In his nightmares he saw them dressed like revolutionaries rushing through the corridors of Southwold. The landlord of the Southwold Arms would be sitting in His Lordship's chair and the dairyman from the village would be sprawled about the Throne Room with the carpenter, and all the time Mr Widgery would be clapping his hands for order. But no-one would hear him, except the maids, who would point at him and laugh. Mr Widgery couldn't stand laughter.

"There's Mr Widgery strutting about like a turkey cock. Anyone would think he was paying for the party," said one of the maids to Rose.

Rose didn't reply. She knew that if the day ever came that she went to work at the big house like her mother had done, she would need to know that she had stayed on the right side of Mr Widgery, whenever possible. Already she had committed a crime, the day that she got lost on the way to the old Countess' rooms, and she wanted to make amends for that

somehow. Joining in with Daisy's gossip would not have been her idea of making amends. Rose knew already that the last person you could trust to keep a still tongue in her head was one of your own sex. She knew this from watching Grandmother gossiping with the old ladies who called at the Lodge, and she knew it from school, where everyone was so anxious to be teacher's special pupil that they would say anything, or do anything, to make you wrong with her. You had to tread your way carefully, the same as if you were speaking with gentry. That was another time that you had to tread your way carefully, the same as Mother had done.

The baby had fallen asleep on her shoulder. She had fed him as much meat and as much cake as he could take, and now satiated, he had fallen asleep, his cheeks flushed from the sun and his hat tipped forward on his eyes. She loved the weight of him on her lap, even though it made it difficult for her to eat what she had chosen for herself. And that again had been difficult. How difficult to know what to choose when there was a choice of so much! Rose didn't think in her whole life that human beings could have seen so much food everywhere. Why there must have been at least a hundred-weight of strawberries alone. And that was to say nothing of the cakes and the trifles and the cream. The cream was a mountain, a real mountain of cream, so yellow and luscious that you were afraid to dip your spoon into such a wonderful construction.

And then there were pheasants and hams and legs of mutton, and capons stuffed to bursting. And there were baskets of red and shiny cherries, and apples and pears polished and then sugared to make them look as if they had snow on them, and there were lobsters with bright pink shells, and tomatoes and peaches from the greenhouses. There were tongues and pressed beef and grouse, and there were large green fruits which Daisy said were called 'melons'. And raspberries, Rose's favourite. Large bowls of raspberries ready to be spooned in heaps onto the shiny white plates provided.

Of course everyone had been a little hesitant to be the first to begin. No-one wished to look greedy, just as no-one wished anyone else to point him or her out as the person who had made a pig of himself at the party. It had taken Ben, more

free and easy in his ways than most by nature of his profession, to start in with a good big helping, because up until then everyone had been taking little tiny dolls' portions and watching each other's plates to see what was the polite amount. But old Ben had no such inhibitions. He pulled a whole grouse to pieces in front of Mr Widgery and ate it with relish, all the time asking Mr Widgery why didn't he join him? And then he gulped a large tankard of ale and started in again, this time on the beef, which he pronounced to be the best that he had eaten since the spring.

"Food is for eating," he said looking around for someone to agree with him, and no sooner had he said that when everyone fell on the tables as if they hadn't eaten anything for weeks and piled their plates nearly as high as the mountain of cream. And some of the maids giggled behind Mr Widgery's back because they could see that Mr Widgery thought Ben had been impertinent, but he couldn't say anything, on account of the fact that even the Earl had pronounced Ben's ale to be the best kept in the country.

Tim had disappeared and Rose guessed that he had taken Tatty some beef. And that wouldn't have been all he had taken Tatty. He loved his dog so much that now the warm nights were here it was all she could do to stop him going to sleep in the kennel with the little terrier. Not that you could blame him. Tatty was no ordinary dog. He was as gay as a lark, and he could jump higher than a dog twice his size. And as for catching rats—well, he was the stable boy's best friend. There wasn't a rat that dared to show his face when Tatty was around, old James the coachman had told her. James liked Tim. He didn't like many, but he liked Tim, there was no doubt of that. Tim was a funny boy. So quiet and so good for his age.

"There's Grandmother overdoing it," he said matter of factly to Rose when he returned. "She'll be letting out her belt pretty quick by the looks of it. Mrs Burrows' had enough. Soon she say to Grandmother 'quick, I be having the palps, quick, I be having the palps'—she always say that when she's eaten her fill, and then Grandmother has to undo her bodice."

"Hush up, Tim," Rose pushed him with her foot. She didn't think that boys of Tim's age should be saying words

like 'bodice'. It wasn't proper. And Mother wouldn't have liked it. Mother never liked to hear them saying words that weren't right for their age, same as she never liked to hear them having too much of an accent. She liked them to speak as she spoke, different from Father and the rest of the village. It was difficult for Tim, though. He sometimes got bullied by the village boys for the way he spoke. That's why he had more accent sometimes now than when Mother was alive. It was natural really.

"There's them Fiddys tucking in," Tim nodded his head in their direction, "they like their food all right. Mary Brownlow's dropped her strawberries, and look at Jim, Rose—he's more cream on his plate than anyone. He likes cream, Jim."

"You're an old woman, Tim," said Rose, as she always did, but she never stopped him from gossiping. He had a way of saying things that made her want to laugh.

"There's going to be dancing later, Rose, and they're going to light all the lanterns."

It was like fairyland, Rose was quite sure of that. When all the tables had been cleared away, and all the food taken back to the kitchen—all the food there was left that is—because what people hadn't eaten they had put in their pockets, or hidden under bushes to collect later when they were going home. Even the fountain had been illuminated, and in the light of the candles the water looked as bright and as sparkling as jewellery in the sunshine.

Lady Marjorie and her husband led off the dancing, because that was how things should be, and the musicians played a waltz so that for a few minutes everyone was very quiet at the sight of such a beautiful pair circling in the light of the candles. And then, of course, no-one felt like dancing, even though the Earl and Countess and the young Viscount Ashby, Lady Marjorie's brother, and all the house guests who were staying with them, even though they were all waltzing, not one person from the village or the estate dared to join them. Because no-one knew how to waltz, or if they did they were afraid to, and then it might not have looked right to dance with gentry already dancing.

Of course everyone clapped when the dance was over, because it had been such a fine and pretty sight, but no-one

knew how to get on with it and start dancing themselves, so they just talked among themselves and pretended that they knew it wasn't right to dance with gentry about.

"Will you have this dance? I'm sorry, will you do me the honour of dancing this one with me?"

Rose felt quite faint at the sight of the young man bowing in front of her. Why on earth would the young Viscount want to dance with a little girl not yet twelve? She looked about her for help, but only Tim was sitting near her on the grass, with the baby asleep beside him. She felt her legs moving forward, and wanted to stop them.

"You dance very nicely," said the young Viscount, "but I wish you would stop watching your feet. What's that?"

"I'm trying to see the step," Rose whispered.

"You don't want to bother about steps," he said gaily, "just do anything, like everyone else."

And everyone else *was* doing anything, anything at all. Rose saw that, when she managed to screw up her courage and glance around the lawn. All the guests from the big house were dancing with the tenants, and there were other children dancing too. Mary Brownlow was dancing with the Earl. It made Rose want to laugh.

After that it was very jolly. Everyone swopping partners after each dance and no-one minding whether they knew the steps or not, and of course there was quite a bit drunk, because dancing is a hot and thirsty business, and when there's free ale, and lemonade for the children, people tend to feel thirstier than they might have done had they been paying for it out of their own pockets.

Tim came up to her.

"I've just danced with Mrs Petifor," he announced proudly, "and she trod on my foot. She's very heavy, Rose."

"Look at Ben, Tim, he's dancing with the Countess. She won't like it if he treads on her toes, will she?"

"Last time Ben trod on someone they didn't walk for a few days," agreed Tim. "James says—" most of Tim's conversation was littered with 'James says'. He was very fond of James. "James say that's why Ted's sister won't wed him. He say that Ted's sister don't like big men, and Ben's too big for her. But James say that Ted's sister will be a spinster if

she go on being so choosy. Father's dancing with her now. Do you think she's pretty, Rose? James says she's not bad for a woman."

Rose looked across to where she could see her father dancing. He was dancing with Ted's sister, and what's more he was looking as if he was enjoying it. She suddenly felt angry. What was Father doing dancing with Ted's sister. It wasn't proper. It wasn't right for him to be dancing with Ted's sister, and enjoying it too. She hoped they would stop dancing now that the music had stopped, and that they would change partners, as almost everyone else was doing, but they didn't. They stood talking. Father talking as he never did normally, half laughing, and bending over Ted's sister as if she was one of his best plants. In fact it looked to Rose as if she might as well be one of his plants, the look he had on his face. Father was in the habit of talking to his plants. He was not in the habit of talking to ladies.

"Here come Albert," said Tim. "Hallo, Albert. Do you want to dance with my sister? She's very dear to dance with. The Viscount danced with her, so now I'm charging a farthing a dance."

Albert smiled uncertainly.

"Rose—Albert wants to dance with you," said Tim a little more loudly, because Rose looked as if she hadn't heard what they'd been saying. "Albert wants to dance with you, and I say a farthing a dance, do you agree, Rose?"

"I haven't got a farthing, Tim," Albert smiled uncertainly.

Albert was the son of a farmer. Rose looked at him. Poor Albert, he was so skinny. He was always getting the worst of it. Hardly a day went by during the winter when they went to school when Albert didn't appear in the school room with a cut or a bruise, because someone had given him a beating. He was so thin that he didn't seem able to defend himself against other boys. Tim said he had no weight to put behind his punch, and that made it difficult for him.

"James say if you haven't got no weight behind your punch, you may as well not worry, and Albert's got no weight you see, Rose. James say he's a bit of a weakling, not like his father and his brother who are built like trees."

"Would you, Rose?"

"What did you say, Albert?"

"Would you have this dance with me?"

"Very well. Tim keep an eye on the baby."

"That's a farthing, Albert," shouted Tim, but they were well into the Posthorn Gallop by then.

They all dashed round and round in time to the music, and Rose quite forgot to keep an eye on her father and Ted's sister as she had meant to do. Albert had thin long fingers, like his long thin body, and he was as dark and pale as she was. She fell against him laughing. Everyone was laughing and falling against each other. The musicians had speeded up the Gallop so much, that there wasn't a person there who wasn't as breathless as they'd ever been.

"Goodness, that was funny."

"Let's go and fetch a lemonade."

"Yes, let's."

It was only standing there by the drinks table that Rose realised that her father had disappeared. Grandmother was still there, and Mrs Burrows, and all the old ladies from the village in their best caps and black dresses. And there was Ted and Ben, and she could even see Albert's father enjoying a joke with another farmer as burly and as red-faced as he was, but nowhere could she see Father, or Ted's sister, Mary.

CHAPTER SIX

The village mourned the passing of the old Countess as heartily as they mourned anyone's passing. Almost as if she was their own mother. True it was that the lady had been of a great age and that everyone must go when they're called, but nevertheless she was missed. She was missed as much as if someone had suddenly forbidden the eating of roast beef on Sunday. They said that it was when her old maid Vilanova passed on that the heart went out of her. Vilanova was the spark that she still needed to keep her going, the necessary sense of impatience that can keep life ticking over when it is, in truth, waning. Vilanova was her childhood, her adolescence and her marriage, and when she died, it was as if the album had finally closed its pages, and that being so, she felt no more need to linger.

It was not customary for the women of the village to go to funerals. Rose watched the cortège passing through the Lodge gates, and thought about how much the old Countess had been to her, and that now she was dead they would no longer see her sledge being pulled through the snow by a little grey pony as they had used to do. The Countess had loved her sledge, although she called it something different, and she would always insist on going in it once or twice a winter if there was the least suggestion of snow.

It was the old Countess who had given her the little box and who had loved her mother to read to her. In her imagination Rose wished that the old Countess was her grandmother, instead of the one she had. She wished that she could have gone and helped look after her when she was ill instead of silly Daisy. Rose knew that she would have looked after her well, the way her mother used to, because she had watched her mother so often. She knew that the old lady liked to be read to from the right hand side, because that was her better ear,

and that she liked sugar in her tea and a glass of port in a little crystal glass before she went to bed (Mother had told her that). She knew also that she didn't think much of her daughter-in-law, and that after the Countess had been to tea with her, she very often got in a bad temper and told Vilanova she was an old fool, even more times than she normally did.

Now she was dead, and watching the horses with their black plumes, the coachman in his black cloak and hat, the carriages with the passengers clothed in black, and the women with long black veils and only the occasional mourning brooch gleaming in the winter's sunlight, Rose thought that she felt sad.

"She was a great lady, a great lady," said her father drowsily at supper that night.

Rose looked round from the sink where she was washing the dishes. Her father was full of ale as usual. He wore a black armband as did all the men in the village, but he didn't know what he was talking about, because he never knew what he was talking about nowadays. She said nothing, because there was very little point in talking to a man who had taken too much drink, of that she was certain. Grandmother snored in her chair. Rose sighed. The Lodge was very dull and quiet when Tim was out, which he was more and more recently. He was only a lad still, but already he had a passion for horses, and to get him to leave the stables, even to go to school, was all she could do. No-one else appeared to care. Father was too pre-occupied with trying to pretend he wasn't down at the Southwold Arms, or courting Ted's sister, and Grandmother was too old and silly to even get herself up the stairs on her own.

Rose had only young John for company. But she loved his company, so it was no hardship really. He was a beautiful boy, as round as an apple with rosy cheeks like an apple and a lovely shiny skin like an apple. He was beautiful. She was lucky with his clothes because Mother had been given so many by the old Countess. Some of them had been worn by the young Viscount when he was little and some hadn't been worn at all. She must have been given them when Tim was born, and of course Rose hadn't taken much notice, not being

older then. But some months back she had found them stored in the attic, all neat and tidy as Mother left everything, with little bags of lavender pressed between them.

Rose had almost cried when she discovered them. Somehow it was as if her mother had just gone out of the room. Just finished tidying them and pressing the lavender bags between each garment and then gone quietly out, so much were they still in place from when she had last touched them with her pretty hands. And how pretty her hands had been! She'd had hands as soft and delicate as if she had just been born, as soft and as delicate as young John's feet before he began to walk.

"Rose?"

Her father looked at her as she sat stitching one of young John's buttons back into place.

"Rose, do you think—?"

Rose looked at him the way she looked at her grandmother, not with dislike but without emotion, which within a family amounts to dislike. Every evening her father seemed to be about to try to tell her something, and every evening she looked at him and thought how much less he was without her mother, and how much a grown man had to have done for him, even though he pretended to be the head of the house.

"What do I think, Father?"

"Do you think it might be wicked in a man to take a wife again?"

"What does the Bible say, Father?"

"I don't know what the Bible says, Rose. My reading's not up to much. Your mother was teaching me to—" he stopped because he knew instinctively that he was going to get in a muddle if he pursued first one line of conversation, and then after a few words, another. That was all right for Rose. She was quick thinking like her mother had been, but he couldn't do that.

He started again.

"You remember when we went to the Brownlows' wedding? That was what I'm talking about, Rose, that was a second wife. The first wife had died, and that was the second wife. You see, Rose, there are certain things a man has need of, and he needs a woman to have those needs with.

Rose put her sewing down.

"This is to do with Ted's sister, isn't it, Father?"

Her father looked at her astonished. If children imagine that they easily deceive their parents, parents are more often fooled by the same thought. He had no idea that Rose knew of his courting of Ted's sister, no idea at all.

"You are right, Rose," he said quietly, "it is to do with Ted's sister. She and I have reached an understanding, but I want you and Tim to be right in your minds about it too, as we are."

Hearing her father saying 'we', and not meaning her mother, Rose felt angry, so angry that if she hadn't been afraid of her father's strength she would have flown at him.

"You can bring another woman into this house, Father, but don't expect Tim to welcome her, and don't expect me to welcome her. And don't think that I will want to see her scrubbing my floors and caring for young John, because I will hate her. I will hate her as much as I love the memory of Mother."

Her father paled, and at that moment Rose realised triumphantly that her father was afraid of her. She might be only a strip of a girl still, and she might be only the daughter of the house, but her father was as afraid of her as if she was his own wife. He was afraid because she now did what Mother had done, nearly as well as Mother had done it, and she looked after Grandmother the way Mother would have done, and she cared for young John the way her mother would have done. She couldn't sew as neatly as her or read as quickly, but she could bake and clean and sweep, and young John looked as well-kept and as well looked after as gentry's children, and her father knew it. Once or twice lately when she had looked in the mirror she had even thought she might look a little like her mother, and she felt proud of that thought.

She picked up her sewing and went up to bed. Young John still slept beside her, although Tim now slept in the box room. She sat down on the end of her bed and stared ahead of her. It was a lonely and sometimes frightening process, growing up without a mother. Rose knew that she would soon be an adult, but her discovery of her impending maturity had

both frightened and embittered her. She wished she could be a woman as beautiful and gracious as her mother had been, but she hated what she had to go through to become like that. So although she ran the house and was mother to her brothers, she still wanted to be a child, as they were. She wanted to be able to crawl on someone's lap the way young John crawled on hers, or spend her days in the stables with Tatty the way Tim did. She thought of the days when her mother was alive, and it seemed to her that she had only been a child for a few minutes.

Soon, too, she would no longer go to school, and would be going up to the big house to start her training as an under-housemaid. She hated the thought of leaving young John, and at night she lay awake listening to his sleeping and wondering who would look after him once she went to work? She knew that Margaret in the village would take him for her, and that once she started earning she could afford to pay her, but that would mean that young John would no longer be around the Lodge. No toys to trip over, no muddy footsteps, no sturdy legs running in and out of the kitchen door pulling up daisies to give her It was an unbearable thought. And then—Margaret was an untidy woman, her hair always sprouting out in all directions, and more times than not a dirty old apron tied round her. And the inside of her cottage was like last year's birds' nests, with stuff hanging from the dressers, and everything so higgledy piggledy that you wouldn't be able to find a place to sit down if you had wanted to. If Margaret looked after him it wouldn't be long before young John looked like any village child, with his mouth covered in yesterday's dinner and clothes hanging off his back which needed mending, and goodness knows what. She didn't want her young John going around looking like any village child, not when she had managed to make him look so good. Not when she had kept him so clean and so neat.

And now there was a worse threat than leaving him with Margaret. There was the thought of Ted's sister. Ted's sister, with her large red hands and her whispy blonde hair, and her face as round as a moon and her large brown eyes, like a cow. Ted's sister might think she was the village beauty now that Lucy was dead, but everyone knew that she was as plain as a

pikestaff, and she spoke like a village woman. Not like Lucy, who had spoken like a lady. The very thought of seeing her standing in the Lodge kitchen, perhaps trying to bake bread or trying to polish the floor—the very thought of that woman doing all those things in her Mother's kitchen, repulsed Rose. No doubt at all but that a woman with large hands like hers would bake bread so leaden and heavy that father would be forever getting indigestion, and Grandmother with her few teeth wouldn't be able to chew it. Rose smiled at the thought. Let her father try to marry again, or let him try to bring another woman to the Lodge, and he would regret it.

She brushed her hair a hundred times, while repeating the Lord's Prayer ten times. Tomorrow, she resolved, she would go down to the village and speak to Margaret. She thought that perhaps between the two of them they could make a plan so that Rose could collect young John in the evenings when she had finished work, and then bring him back to Margaret in the mornings. It would mean getting up early and going to bed late, but he was her brother, and no matter what, she was determined to try to keep him with her as much as she could.

She turned sideways and looked in the mirror. Her hair was getting really quite long.

Rose trod carefully over the cobblestoned alleyway that led to Margaret's cottage. She had just passed Albert in the main street. He looked as if he might be in trouble, as usual. A crowd of boys from another village had passed by and seeing Albert sitting on a wall reading, they had surrounded him. At the moment that she had passed by Albert had been employed in talking at them so fast that they hadn't yet had time to set upon him.

She had just knocked on Margaret's door, and stepped inside at her call, when Albert himself pushed past her, slammed the door, and leant against it. The hounds were after him.

"Quick, push the table!"

Rose and Margaret ran behind Margaret's heavy old table, and pushed as hard as they could, just in time to stop the door from giving way. Gangs from other villages would often cause trouble. Boys that should be busy working the land, or

helping their fathers, would take pleasure in causing trouble to their neighbours.

"Pests they are, but they'll be off soon." Margaret drew her front room curtains to shut out the grinning faces.

Even her curtains had saggy, untidy hems, Rose noticed, and sighed at the thought that young John might soon be in her charge. She was a good woman, Margaret, but a dreadful muddler.

"I did nothing," Albert looked at the two women hopelessly. "I was sitting doing some of my reading, on the church wall."

"Reading's enough to bother some," said Margaret significantly, and pushed some sewing on to the floor so that Rose could sit down. "Some people don't hold with reading at all, but just you find a place to sit, Albert, and I'll make us a cup of tea. You'll be wanting a cup of tea, after an experience."

To Margaret, who rarely saw the outside of her cottage except to walk to church on Sundays, everything was 'an experience'. Her lazy attitude towards life was offset by her intense interest in anyone's 'experiences'. If any one of her many children hurt themselves or were ill, they were always told 'my, you have had an experience', and there was no doubt that her amiable attitude went a long way to healing them quicker than any medicine. The children weren't often ill, although they were always out in all weathers, possibly because their mother's muddle was too much, even for them, and it was a source of astonishment to Rose that they all fitted into the one, small cottage when the weather was too much for them to venture out. There were only two bedrooms in the cottage and no box room like the Lodge, and now Margaret was in a condition once more, and that would make six, not counting the baby that she was nursing for the poor girl who died last January.

Albert ventured to peep through one of the curtains when they had all finished their tea.

"They've gone," he said with relief.

"Poor lad, you could have been no match for all of them," Margaret looked at him affectionately.

Albert's colour had returned little by little listening to the

girls chatting while they drank their tea, but now it deepened, and he looked at the floor, "I'm no match for anyone," he mumbled, "not anyone."

"That's because you're young yet, you'll soon broaden out," said Margaret encouragingly, "why, my brother Will, he never was more than a bit of a lad until he got to sixteen, and then he filled out, and he got so large he'd give people who'd not seen him for some time a real experience. Rose will know that I'm saying the truth. She remembers Will who used to carry her on his shoulders when she was a little thing, don't you, Rose?"

Rose nodded. "It's true, Will was a big man, Albert, as big as Father, bigger almost I should have said."

"You see, Albert, there's no saying that being as thin as you are is all you will experience." Margaret settled herself more comfortably into her chair, from whence, Rose suspected, she would not be moving for the rest of the afternoon. Margaret liked sitting almost as much as she liked having company in her cottage. Being married to the farrier meant that you were on your own a good deal, while he journeyed to outlying farms and places as much as fifteen miles away.

"Now, Rose, say why you've come to visit me. Tell me why you're here. We all know why Albert's here," she added somewhat tactlessly, and again Albert blushed so hot and red that Rose could have sworn that you could have warmed your hands just by holding them up to his face.

Rose had no such shyness. Perhaps because she had taken her mother's place for as much as nearly four years now, everyone in the village tended to treat her as the mistress of the Lodge. They forgot that she was only coming up fourteen and would not have been considered if her mother had been alive. But so quick was she in her ways, and so tidy was the Lodge, and so well-kept the child, that no-one now thought of her as 'Rose' that they knew only a few years back. Rose, with her dog Tatty running barefoot through the village, and Rose with her young brother Tim. Now she was 'Rose of the Lodge', and they stopped to chat with her when they saw her and asked after the children, just as if they were her sons and not her brothers.

Of course everyone in the village knew how long poor John

had come courting Ted's sister, and naturally there had been endless speculation as to the outcome. It was now a long time that John had come up to Ted's house and sat in the back-room with the family, and it was considered that the poor man had served his time and that he should be allowed to take a second wife, same as any man would who'd lost his first in childbirth. There was even a ripple of pleasant anticipation at the thought that there might be a good wedding to dance at—Ted being a generous man. Even so, everyone knew also that poor John was in the habit of respecting his daughter the way he had once been ruled by his strange, foreign wife, and no-one dared advise him to his face, this way or that, although there was no-one to be found who hadn't had a theory which they had voiced in private.

"If it was me, I'd belt her, and that would be that," Mr Brownlow had said one night in the Southwold Arms.

Although there wasn't a man in the place who didn't sympathise with this idea, nevertheless the company looked uneasy at the thought. Rose was a slip of a girl it was true, but she had a sharp tongue, as all women tended to who had been taught to read, and she was moreover a pet of the school teacher and no-one would like to be answerable to the school teacher. The school teacher had been appointed by the vicar, and the vicar had been appointed by the Earl, and it therefore didn't take much imagination to think that to be in disfavour with teacher might mean that you would end up being in disfavour with the Earl of Southwold himself.

So no-one raised his voice in agreement with Mr Brownlow and only Ben behind the bar saw fit to disagree with him, because he was that sore at not being able to court Ted's sister himself that he was prepared to defend Rose against all-comers, so long as she was known to be against the marriage and even though she was a woman.

Because she had an assumed maturity, Rose could approach the subject of Margaret looking after young John once she went into service, with no embarrassment. She did not blush to look Margaret in the face the way Albert had done, and she sat upright on her chair as her Mother had taught her, and didn't fidget and fiddle the way most girls her age would. Margaret observed this, and listened to Rose, but what she

had to say in return to Rose's enquiry wasn't what Rose expected, nor was it what she wanted to hear, and at the end, when Margaret had quite finished saying what was on her mind, Rose was blushing as red as Albert had just done, and she was looking only just her fourteen years and as vulnerable as a kitten.

"Rose, I'm as fond of young John as if he was my own, but no child should be shuttled backward and forward from Lodge to cottage like a basket on market day. It wouldn't be right, Rose. No sooner had you left him than he'd start setting up because he'd miss you, and then when he'd settled in with me, why it would be dark and you'd be back fetching him and he'd set up because he wouldn't want to leave here. And so it would be Rose, and it's not right for a child. He's your brother and you've brought him up since he was a baby, but it wouldn't be right. And all for what, Rose? So that you could see him sleeping beside your bed at night? You're young to have these feelings put upon you, Rose, but every mother knows that if she doesn't learn that she'll know nothing but heartbreak all her days, and now you have to learn it although you're hardly more than a child. Let poor John marry Ted's sister! She's a good woman, she'll do you no harm, and come the autumn you'll be working at the big house, and you'll not worry about her sooner than you think. Why, you'll be so tired when you get back each night when they've finished with you, it'll be all you'll be able to do to keep awake to climb the stairs to your bed. And that'll be no good to young John. Let your father marry and be in peace, Rose, and let your mother's memory be likewise."

Rose burst out of Margaret's cottage like a bull charging through a gate, and for no reason that he knew, Albert followed her. She was so angry with Margaret, and what she had said, that if she could have she would have hit her with her hand. But she knew that should she, Margaret would clap her one so hard about the ears that Rose wouldn't have heard properly for a while. Margaret was gentle, and Margaret was lazy, but Margaret had an arm on her that could clout as well as her husband could shoe a horse. It was said that the first time he got drunk, she had thrown first his clothes out of the

window and then his bed linen and that he had had to run for his life to escape following them.

Rose stopped by the churchyard wall to catch her breath, and then, quite suddenly, she burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Rose," Albert put his hand on her arm, and Rose nearly jumped out of her skin. She hadn't noticed him running after her, nor seen that he was beside her.

"My, you gave me a fright, Albert," she jumped backwards from him, and her tears stopped as suddenly as they had come on.

"I don't like to see you cry, Rose," said Albert, and his concern was so evident, and he looked so thin and as vulnerable as she felt, that she didn't mind him taking her hand and patting it, although normally she'd have told him off, especially since they were so near the church.

"My mother's buried here, Albert, and now all they can talk about is Father marrying again," Rose looked down at her mother's headstone, and her pale face looked pinched from crying. She tossed her head. "It's not right, Albert, it's not right at all. And what will happen when Father gets to heaven. Which wife will then be his, may I ask?"

Albert looked as puzzled by this question as any man would.

"I don't know much about that, I'm afraid, Rose, but we could go for a walk and talk about the Bible, if you'd like to."

"No, I can't do that, Albert. I've got to go home and give young John his milk, and then there's the washing to be brought in, because Grandmother can't be trusted with anything now. And if she tries and drops it, it'll mean another day's scrubbing tomorrow, and I can't scrub tomorrow because tomorrow's baking day, and if you do washing on baking day, then not one thing gets done properly in the rush."

"Can I walk with you, back to the Lodge?"

"Yes, you may, Albert, but don't let's talk any more or I might start crying again, and women who cry deserve what they get. Crying never got you anywhere."

The way she said that, and the determined manner in which she walked beside him, impressed Albert. He felt that if only he had something of Rose's character he would possibly grow

big and strong like Margaret's brother, Will, and that he would no longer live in fear of his father. He would liked to have talked to Rose about his father, and how much he was afraid of him, because he had a feeling that she might understand, but he couldn't because he was a little afraid of Rose too.

That night Rose sat and watched young John asleep. She knew that what Margaret had said was true. She knew it in her heart, and she knew it in her mind, but the thought of sharing her kitchen with another woman was more than she could bear. And yet how else would young John be looked after? It had long ago been arranged between her grandmother and Mrs Petifor that she should go to work in the big house once autumn came and the harvest was over, and now the time was coming and Rose knew that young John could never be cared for by her grandmother. Margaret was right in knowing that they couldn't tear a young boy between two places. He was his father's son and he belonged in the Lodge, and whatever Ted's sister was or was not, Rose would not be seeing her all day, nor until late in the evening. Yet if she was here—then young John would be here, and Rose would still see him.

"I think you should marry, Father."

Rose had waited up for her father to come home, and now he paused in the doorway with his hat still on his head and looked at her astounded. Rose found it difficult to keep an expression of repulsion from her face. She could almost hear the ale swilling about in his stomach and he looked so red in the face, like a turkey.

"Did I hear you, Rose?"

"I don't know, Father. I said I thought you should marry. Like Mr Brownlow, take a wife, or you might get lonely."

Rose heard her voice sounding so prim and like gentry against her father's thickened voice and heavier accent. Sometimes she felt so distant from him, like she did now. But on other days he would suddenly do something, or suddenly say something, that would make her feel that it was something she would have said at that moment or something she was in the habit of doing. Such moments were like a pain in her chest and she would suddenly remember how much she had

loved him when her mother was alive and how happy they had been.

"I don't need your advice, young Rose," said John, but Rose could tell by the way that he had sat down so suddenly, that he was as surprised and pleased as if it was Christmas Day and he'd forgotten it. "Of course, as you know, Rose, Ted's sister and I have been giving it some thought for some time, but we would—" he suddenly stopped, and to Rose's horror, drunken tears started to drip down his cheeks.

"Why, Father, you mustn't cry," she knelt beside his chair, and then she too cried, because now she had said what she had said she knew that nothing would ever be the same again, and soon there would be someone else to be in the house in her stead, and someone else would pick up young John when he fell over, and there would be someone else in her father's bed.

"Mind, Father, I don't think it would be good to have the wedding until after the harvest." She knew that he would agree to anything while he had drunk so much and while he was so happy at the idea that he could marry. "Not until after the harvest," she said again.

Naturally the news of the impending wedding was greeted with relief by most of the village.

"I didn't think I could take the sight of John going up to Ted's place one more time," Mrs Burrows remarked to anyone who would listen, and the whiskers on her face twitched with pleasant anticipation at the thought of the food and drink to be enjoyed at the feast.

"Does Father want to get married because he feels lonely?" Tim asked Rose.

"Yes, Tim," said Rose, "and then men like having wives, so they can do the work. And that's important, now I'm going up to work at the big house."

"Jim likes Ted's sister. He says she's a woman who knows where she should be, and butter won't turn at the sight of her neither."

"Well, that's as may be," said Rose.

She was concerned that not only she should look proper for the wedding, but Tim and young John and of course the groom, who was so excited nowadays that it was all he

could do to manage to remember his duties. Grandmother was taken care of, because she had her shawl, and that was all right. But Tim and young John weren't so easy to fit with something. Tim grew every minute of the day, so that sometimes she thought he must have been living on oats like the horses, so leggy had he become. And then Rose had finally grown out of everything but the one dress that she had worn at Lady Marjorie's wedding celebrations, and even that was too small if she was honest.

Like all her problems, Rose regarded the question of the family wedding attire as one that she should work out on her own. She pondered for days how she could turn every one of them into something special for the great day, and how to make them all from sow's ears into silk purses, and eventually she came up with the solution.

"Well, I never did in all my born days," said Grandmother when Rose passed her the hat she had trimmed for her. "Is that what you were doing that day you went to town?"

Rose nodded excitedly, and watched Grandmother peering blindly at herself in the looking glass above the kitchen sink. A slow smile spread across her face as she gradually saw herself revealed in the splendour of the trimmed hat. Ribbons and roses might not be quite the thing for an old lady in some people's eyes, but to Mrs Buck her day had come. It might be late, but it had come.

"How did you come by all this?" Grandmother half-whispered. She was so astonished, not just by her hat, but by the sight of every one of them in fine new clothes, right down to young John in a suit of blue and a wonderfully cut pair of knickerbockers.

"We're not having Ted's family saying we looked poor for the wedding," said Rose crisply, and patted her own hat proudly. It had a saucy bow.

"She spent her dowry, Mother," John looked across at his mother. "What was left from her box."

His mother said nothing. She couldn't wait to see Mabel Burrows. The ribbons on her hat exactly matched her shawl. It would be enough to turn Mabel quite sour, she was glad to say. And then what a turn out they were going to be for the village to gossip over! Mrs Buck's heart swelled with pride.

Rose might not be a soft girl, she might bully and chivvy, and look too much like her mother to make you feel comfortable, but she knew what was wanted, when it was wanted. And that was a good thing, especially at a wedding.

There were more people in the church than Rose would have thought possible. Everyone arranged themselves on either side of the aisle as best they could, though some were in a great confusion because they felt themselves to be friends of both sides. Poor Ben, who had had such a soft spot for Ted's sister, sat at the back, as if by doing so he could absolve himself from the proceedings and yet show willing because he had at least turned up.

"Brethren, we are gathered here today—"

The vicar looked at the couple before him with some sympathy. John was a good man, and quite a favourite with the Countess because of his gardening. Now he was taking a new wife and one from the village—he knew that everyone felt that it was a day for rejoicing. Even the vicar felt a trifle thirsty.

It was a fine day when they all wandered out into the churchyard. A little breezy, but sunny. The women's dresses billowed becomingly and the ribbons on their hats fluttered. There wasn't one person present who hadn't noticed that the Bucks were sporting new clothes, including the bridegroom in a new jacket of lovat green. Not that anyone saw fit to make a comment, yet. Now they all shook hands and exchanged greetings as they were accustomed to do on Sundays, and as if they hadn't already seen each other only too recently.

"I'll help Grandmother," Rose told Tim. "You go with Mrs Burrows."

Tim sighed. He hated going with Mrs Burrows. She leant so hard on his shoulder, and she smelt of camphor.

Ted and his brothers had hurried back after the ceremony to put the finishing touches to the house. Now that the guests had started to arrive, they were all standing in a straight line next to the bride and groom, like skittles in a row.

"I don't suppose you'll be drinking, then," said Ben to Ted, as he shook his hand at the door. "It's not the custom in this house, I hear."

He looked wry, or he attempted to look wry, but failed and succeeded only in looking embarrassed. The largeness of his face and figure prevented him from being able to register any great subtlety of expression, just as it is difficult for a thin man to look jovial.

"We're making today an exception," said Ted, speaking for himself and his brothers. He looked as embarrassed as any man would who had failed to bring business to the Southwold Arms for so much time. "It's not every day our sister gets married, I hope, and that being so, it's an exception. A fine thing it would be if her brothers never drank her health. You wouldn't but agree with that would you, Ben?"

By this time Ben was half way down the line of brothers, so he hadn't heard, but he had seen the spread that the brothers had provided, and feeling heartened by the sight of it, he had quite forgotten any bitterness he might have felt about the brothers' desertion of his good inn.

Rose too looked at the tables with the food laid out on it, and her eyes widened. If she had spent all her dowry on their clothes, then Ted and his brothers had surely spent all their savings on the wedding feast. It was a most wonderful display. Perhaps Lady Marjorie's wedding celebrations had given the brothers an incentive, set them a target at which to aim, and that being so, they had not missed their mark by very much.

"She kissed me, Rose," said Tim thickly through his clotted cream and fruit pie. "I don't like people kissing me, Rose. And then she said, 'I'll be a mother to you.' I don't want her being a mother to me, Rose."

"That's your third helping, Tim, you'll be sick," said Rose, and wished her grandmother wouldn't make noises when she had finished eating. It was somehow so odd, particularly when she was wearing such a smart hat.

A drowsiness set over the company once they had eaten their fill. The men grouped in one corner refilled their glasses and drank ale and cider, but the women and children at the other end lay about like cats in the sunshine, and if they could have stretched out they would have done. As it was their heads nodded sideways a little, and several of the old ladies forgot

all about company manners and let their chins droop on to their fronts and snored as heartily as they had eaten.

"Come outside, come outside," Tim burst into the room waking them all from their dozy state. "There's a fiddler and his boy, and they've got a dog that does tricks."

"Bless me, it's years since I saw a fiddler," said Grandmother, and followed the rest of the company outside into the sunshine. "Why, there he is, I would have said Tim was 'een now deceiving us with one of his stories if I hadn't seen for myself."

"Come on," shouted Ted. "Let's dance then."

Since it was his land, and his garden, the villagers needed no second urging. Within moments jackets were taken off and hats flung unceremoniously on the grass, and everyone began to dance in any fashion that took them. It was as if they all sensed that this was one of the remaining days of sunshine, now the harvest was gathered and autumn upon them, and they wanted to dance to celebrate the day, and the marriage, and then to dance while they still could—outside in the air and feeling the soft green grass under their feet.

It is debatable whether more happiness is found by refinement. The sophisticated man seems always to be seeking to find what the peasant takes for granted. A sense of carelessness, an inhibition, a whole-hearted enjoyment. Certainly no-one dancing to the fiddler outside Ted's house would have envied the performers at a debutante ball, and yet there might have been more than a number of people at any Society event that year who would have given a great deal to be dancing with the same gaiety as Ted's guests.

"I hope Ted takes care not to ask them in," said Mrs Burrows, watching from the porch. "They're Irish those fiddlers, and you can't be too careful with Irish. I once knew of a man who got left for dead by an Irishman."

The music grew faster and faster and soon it had found out who had eaten too much and who had drunk too much and who was not getting any younger, until finally only the young ones were left, dancing and dancing as if their lives depended on it or they were going to be paid at the end. Rose changed hands and looked over her shoulder at Albert as they passed each other. He danced lightly, Albert, and his thin

hand felt cool beside everyone else's. He saw her looking at him, and blushed. She shut her eyes, and for a minute tried to pretend she was dancing in a ballroom, not with Albert and the children, but with a young man who was nobly born and thought Rose the most beautiful girl in the room.

Dusk fell. The fiddlers were paid, given a glass of ale, and sent on their way. Rose looked round for her father. He had gone. Home to the Lodge with his new bride.

"I call that a downright thing to do," grumbled Ben, "going off in secret like that before we could clout them, or wish them well."

"Don't worry, I've put things in their bed as you wouldn't want to find at any time," Grandmother laughed, and the rest of the company laughed with her. Rose didn't. She didn't like to think about that sort of thing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mrs Dickinson looked at Rose. She was getting to be, if not a pretty girl, at least quite striking. Her hair needed tidying up a trifle, and she was very thin, but nevertheless you could see she could be attractive. Having thought that, she then felt a sense of regret. An attractive face could not, in her mind, be anything but a drawback if you were about to start training as an under-housemaid. Goodness knows what indignities she would have to suffer from other members of the staff. Mrs Dickinson had once had a cousin who was a knight's wife, so she felt she knew something of the kind of life that Rose was about to enter. Staff were always bickering, her cousin had told her, and the larger the staff the more they seemed to take it out of each other.

Of course, some of the regret she felt at Rose leaving her school was professional. She knew that if she had had the time, she could have really made something of Rose Buck. She knew it because of the attention that Rose paid to detail. Nothing seemed to escape her observation. And knowing how she was responsible for her brothers had often made Mrs Dickinson wonder how she had had any enthusiasm left for reading or writing. Now all that quickness and ability would go towards blacking fires and making beds and emptying night chambers.

Mrs Dickinson sighed at the thought. It was really so primitive the way girls like Rose were put to work so young, but then it was only a few years ago that politicians had put a stop to the number of hours that children could work.

"I've read all this book, Mrs Dickinson," Rose put the book she had been lent on the school teacher's desk, "and I understood most of it."

"That's very good, Rose. Now don't forget to come and see me, even now you'll be working. And practise that writing of

yours whenever you can. A good hand takes particular practice."

"Yes, Mrs Dickinson."

"Work hard now, Rose, but don't abandon the three R's. It's just as important for a housemaid to be literate as it is for a duchess, never forget that."

"No, Mrs Dickinson."

Rose shook hands, and bobbed a curtsy, and then she walked down the school room. No more sitting in the white-painted room learning about all those wonderful things. She did hope she'd remember some of them. And that Mrs Dickinson would be proud of her.

Mrs Dickinson watched her go. One of her best pupils, gone to be a housemaid. Still, at least she had Albert Smith. One day he might live to make Southwold School famous. Or if not Albert, then someone else. It was Mrs Dickinson's ambition to have a famous pupil. Great men so often had humble beginnings, she only hoped that one of them would one day come under her guiding hand. Teaching had its own rewards of course, but she did hope that one day she would earn that final accolade. She wondered why she felt low in herself. It wasn't as if she wouldn't be seeing Rose, and she'd still be in the village.

And it wasn't far for Rose to go to work. But the way she felt that morning when she set off from the Lodge to arrive promptly after the staff had breakfasted, it might have been France. She hardly ate anything, although Mary and her father tried to coax her to fill her tummy.

"You'll be needing it, Rose," said Mary gently.

But Rose could only look at her, and say nothing. She felt so nervous she really could not swallow anything, not even a cup of tea. She looked at young John happily chewing his bacon. Already he was beginning to show signs of attachment to Mary, and she was very gentle with him, it had to be admitted, not like Grandmother. In Rose's eyes she still looked like a friendly cow, with her round placid face and her brown eyes, but she was not someone to be forever whipping a child. She might not know how to dress him and she might not know exactly how he should look, but she kept him clean and tidy nevertheless. Naturally, Rose had been able to give her

advice on many points, and she was glad to say that Mary had taken them to heart, and what's more put them into practice too.

"Behave yourself, girl," said Grandmother from the corner of the kitchen.

If Rose had had her hair loose, she would have tossed her head at Grandmother's remark, but it was pinned up underneath the little white hat that was her uniform. At first it had been exciting trying on a new uniform. Black dress and white cap, thick black stockings, and a pair of new shoes that squeaked when you walked because the leather was so stiff and new. But this morning the uniform felt strange and unfriendly, and the shoes were tight as she crunched up the drive. She didn't know why, but now she was actually going into service at the big house, and it was her first day, she didn't think it was quite proper to walk across the lawns but more appropriate to walk up the drive and circle round to the staff entrance.

The house looked immense. Perhaps because she was going into its service. It seemed as large as something in a dream, and it stared down at her, watching her like a big dog watches an ant approaching one of its paws. Its perfect proportions were already like a challenge to her own inadequacies and in the early morning autumn air the fabric of the building appeared to be alive, a cool moulded brick that when you touched it would be as soft as its colour.

Standing in the servants hall, Rose felt quite lost. Lost in her clothes, which were too big for her thin frame. Lost in this new, bustling, noisy, incomprehensible world.

There was no-one who seemed to be still. And yet everyone appeared to know exactly where they should be going, and what they should be doing. They were clearing, sweeping, putting away, coming in, or going out, as if directed by unseen voices. Occasionally someone spoke to someone else and there was a suppressed giggle, and an unsuppressed frown from Mr Widgery, but otherwise no-one appeared to notice each other, so concentrated were they on the tasks they had in hand.

This was a scene that Rose would grow used to, eventually

not even notice, so familiar was it to become; but on that first day she wanted to run away. She wanted to go home.

Mr Widgery beckoned to a girl who was dressed much the same as Rose, only her hat was a little taller, with slightly more lace on it, and her dress fitted her.

"Anne!"

"Yes, Mr Widgery."

"This is Rose, the new under-housemaid. She will be sharing duties with Lottie." He looked at Rose. "Work hard, girl, learn your duties, and you will find that no-one bothers you, not even me. Right, be off, don't hang around with your mouths falling open! Can't stand my staff being dawdlers, we don't tolerate dawdlers at Southwold. I should say not."

Rose followed Anne up the backstairs.

"When you walk through the house, Rose, you must never make a noise and you must walk to the side of the stairs, and if anyone passes you, you pause, and let them go by. Do you understand?"

Rose nodded. She felt just like that day when Lucy had brought her to the house, and then again when she had come to see the old Countess, and got lost.

Everything she did that first week, she did to the sound of Anne's voice instructing her. She thought she had known how to run a house, and how to be a cook. She learnt in only one hour at Southwold that she knew nothing.

"Staff do not raise their voices in the house."

"Should you ever catch sight of the Earl and Countess, you bob a curtsy."

"Never put your brushes away in a dirty state."

"Never talk at table until the vegetables have been served."

If she had worked hard running the Lodge since her mother's death, if she had worked hard at her reading and writing, now she slaved. It was just as Margaret had said. When she got back to the Lodge at night, when she crawled back down the drive, her feet swollen in their tight black shoes and her arms aching from twelve hours non-stop duties, she could hardly pull herself up the stairs to her little bedroom. And in the morning she was gone before she had time to exchange more than a word with anyone.

It took time to sort out the staff at the house. And if she had thought she had known a little about the structure of Southwold from being the Lodge Keeper's daughter, she now realised that she had glimpsed from the Lodge windows only a little of the grandeur that made up Southwold. She had seen the greenhouses, but not the fruit. Now she saw it being piled up in silver baskets. Peaches, pears, apples, grapes. She had seen the butcher's cart swaying through the gates. Now she saw the carcases being dragged through the kitchen. She saw crystal glass, silver and gold plate, china and porcelain of every description, and for the first time the reality of Southwold frightened her, and then it won her.

Quite suddenly she knew that more than anything she wanted to be part of this life, this extraordinary, magnificent awe-inspiring existence. She didn't want to marry someone in the village, as Margaret had done, and bring up a mob of children. She wanted to be like Anne in her crisp uniform. Anne, bossing her and Lottie about, or Mrs Petifor bossing Anne. She wanted to be somebody in the awe-inspiring hierachy in which she was at present nobody.

Rose knew that nothing could change the fact that she was the Lodge Keeper's daughter, just as nothing could change the fact that Lottie was Big Jim the coachman's daughter. They both had the same advantage in that, by dint of their birth, they had both been admitted to Southwold. But Rose was not like Lottie. She didn't dream of marrying a farmer and going to market in her best bonnet. She dreamt of becoming a personal maid, like Miss Hodges. She didn't want to find a way out of Southwold, she wanted to find a way up Southwold.

Lottie was a plump little creature, and she cried a great deal, which Rose found embarrassing. She felt that Lottie was letting down the under-housemaids by crying every time something went wrong or Anne scolded her, but Lottie was impervious to Rose's embarrassment. If she felt hurt, she cried.

"What is it, Lottie?"

"It's Mrs Petifor, she says I'm to have no dinner because of the chip in that plate last night. And I'm so hungry, Rose."

Rose looked at Lottie. She was so plump and pathetic, like a fat puppy whimpering in the dark of the corridor.

"I'll put some of mine in my pocket for you," she said comfortingly, "but do hurry, Lottie. If we're found here neither of us will have dinner."

"Will you really keep something for me, Rose? I get so hungry, and when I go home, there's nothing left."

"Yes, I'll keep something for you."

Rose managed to slip a piece of tart into her pocket. It lay wrapped in her handkerchief, until she and Lottie were sent to draw the curtains in the steward's room and lay the table for tea. Mrs Petifor and Mrs Amey liked to have tea together. Mrs Amey was Southwold's treasured cook. She made the madeira cakes that Mrs Petifor doted on, so their friendship was based on something pretty solid.

It wasn't until Lottie saw the cake lying out upon the table surrounded by all the other little delicacies that Mrs Petifor paricularly liked to see on a tea table that she remembered just how hungry she was, and that Rose remembered the tart lying in her handkerchief as the bottom of her pocket. She gave it to Lottie who crammed it into her mouth as fast as she could, but not fast enough, and being Lottie she managed to leave a large display of crumbs all around her mouth.

"Mr Widgery!"

"Mrs Petifor?"

In Rose's eyes the room appeared to darken as Mr Widgery entered.

"Mr Widgery," Mrs Petifor was triumphant as she looked from Lottie to the butler, and back again. "Mr Widgery, would you believe your eyes? Would you, Mr Widgery? Here is an under-housemaid, a person little higher than a scully, and she is eating, Mr Widgery, eating a piece of tart in the steward's room! Can you believe your eyes, Mr Widgery, if you had not been called to witness this scene of abandon, this orgy of eating, this complete abnegation of all that an under-housemaid should be engaged in?"

Mrs Petifor had had the benefit of a good education by virtue of a father who had been doing rather better earlier on in his life than he eventually did towards its end, and by her

literate use of words she could subtly, and constantly, remind the rest of the staff of this.

Mr Widgery had absolutely no idea what 'abnegation' meant, but he had absolutely no intention of letting Mrs Petifor realise this. He thought it might be to do with the Bible, and then he thought it might not; but he made a little note in the back of his mind to look it up in an old volume of Debrett's when he got a chance. He felt sure that Debrett's, being the kind of volume that it was, would carry such words as 'abnegation'. In fact, he would dare swear it was something to do with kings coming and going, although what that had to do with housemaids, under or over, had him beaten.

He blinked several times to allow himself time to form his words. Mrs Petifor's magnificent use of the Queen's English irritated him intensely, if he was to be completely honest, which he was not in the habit of being for the most part of the day. He was fond of calling this habit 'protecting others'. And he was *very* fond of 'protecting others'. He 'protected' the Earl and Countess from things below stairs, and he 'protected' persons below stairs from themselves; that, in his opinion, was a butler's main task. However, protection apart, at this very moment he sensed that he was about to do something very dramatic, something he had not had the pleasure of doing for some time, and something that he secretly enjoyed doing more than anything in the world. He was about to wield his power.

He might not have Mrs Petifor's power over words, but he had complete power below stairs. His word was law, and although it was his duty to treat Mrs Amey with the reverence due to a superb cook, and Nanny with the respect due to one who had brought up the Heir, and Mrs Petifor with the right degree of manners and authority, nevertheless he was king of his underworld. He was the emperor of the darkness of the silver cupboards, ruler over all glass and porcelain, the never sleeping conscience of the domestic nation contained in the servants' hall, the steward's room, and in every pantry and scullery that Southwold boasted.

Mr Widgery advanced a step. Rose felt that she could scream, if she had dared. She knew that her career was already in ruins, after only one week. She knew it from the

way that Mr Widgery had drawn himself up to his full height. She knew it from the time he took to speak, and she knew it from the way that Lottie was cowering against the wall.

"You have been eating have you not?"

Lottie nodded.

"You have been eating, here in the steward's room, without a by your leave, or a word from anyone. You have had the impudence, the impudence—" he repeated this word in the hope that Mrs Petifor might be impressed by it, even though it didn't quite reach the giddy heights of 'abnegation', "to eat a tart here, within sight of Mrs Petifor, in front of Mrs Amey, and this after having been forbidden dinner because you had disgraced yourself earlier."

Tears started to drip down Lottie's cheeks, where they had been frozen in terror behind her eyelids before.

"I am going to dismiss you, Lottie Freston. I'm going to dismiss you without reference, and without character. I am going to send you back to your poor sire, and let him make of you what he will."

Lottie started to scream. It was horrible.

"Please, Mr Widgery sir, please, don't send me home. My father will beat me, sir, he will, sir. He beats me, he wouldn't touch a horse but he beats me. Please, sir, don't, sir."

Not even Mr Widgery was prepared for this terrible outburst. Rose felt herself go white as Mr Widgery pulled Lottie away from his feet. And she remembered that Tim had told terrible tales of the beatings that Big Jim was in the habit of giving his nine children. And how thankful they had been that their own father had never touched them—although Rose knew that sometimes he might have liked to—but he never did, because Mother would never stand for violence, the way she would never stand for bad manners, and anyway, one look from her grey eyes would be enough to quieten anyone.

"Out, girl, out!" ordered Mr Widgery, and there was a shocked silence as he conducted the weeping Lottie to the back door, with the command to return her uniform later that evening, or else it would be the very worst for her.

Rose could hardly believe it. Mrs Petifor and Mrs Amey sat down to their tea and cake, and Mr Widgery went upstairs to answer His Lordship's bell. Everyone resumed their

tasks, as if nothing had happened, and more important to Rose, no-one, but no-one, had asked Lottie where, or from whom, she had got the tart.

Lottie herself had said nothing. But would she continue to say nothing? Would she return the uniform without mentioning the fact that Rose had been party to her heinious crime? Would she not wish to drag Rose down with her?

"Here's the uniform, sir."

Lottie's little figure crept into the servants hall and presented the bundle of clothes, together with the pair of black shoes and the little white hat.

Rose was not the only person to notice that there were bruises and cuts on Lottie's face, that her eyes were quite swollen from crying, and that she walked with difficulty as if she had been beaten across her back so hard that she could no longer straighten herself.

Mr Widgery chose to speak in the silence that followed her departure.

"Let that be a lesson to the junior servants," he said, "let that be a lesson to you all that rules are rules, and rules are to be obeyed and not to be flouted. Thou Shalt Not Steal. Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbour's Goods. It is all contained in the Bible and at Southwold all we do is to abide by the Bible. I should say so."

Rose shivered, and thanked her stars that Lottie had said nothing. Her replacement was a girl who had been born in London. Rose regarded her with suspicion. She was older than Rose, and had had experience elsewhere. Her name was May.

May was as pretty as a picture and there wasn't one footman or groom, or one red-blooded male at Southwold, who didn't notice her as soon as she arrived. She swung up the drive as if she had worked there all her life, and what's more, as if Southwold was lucky to have her.

Perhaps by virtue of her different accent, and her knowing ways, there wasn't anyone below stairs that could say they weren't impressed by May. She didn't giggle or chatter and she wasn't lazy or idle. On the contrary she was quick and efficient and she only spoke when spoken to. But what May didn't say, she thought. And what she thought, she showed in

her eyes, and in her eyes Mrs Petifor could read disrespect and Mrs Amey could see impertinence and Mr Widgery—challenge.

She had large, blue eyes with long black lashes, although her hair was blonde, and her cheeks were as soft and as downy as the peaches from the greenhouses. A fact that filled Mrs Petifor with spite.

Mrs Petifor would have liked to have caught her out, Mrs Amey would have liked to have scolded her, but what Mr Widgery would like to do with her, he hadn't yet admitted to himself.

Rose fell in love with May the way younger girls often fall in love with older friends. She worshipped her at first from afar, and then as an intimate, an honoured confidante. May had only to sigh, and Rose would want to know why. May had only to do her hair in a different way, and Rose longed to have hers the same. May spoke with a London accent. Every night, however tired, Rose would practise her accent on the way home. May said '*really*' in such a pretty way, and she said 'go on', if Rose managed to make her laugh. And she said words like 'lawks' if she was surprised, and she was wonderful at doing everything. Rose felt that if she could do things the way May could, then she, Rose, would become a maid like Miss Hodges, and quicker than she could dream about.

It was obvious from the way that Mr Widgery regarded May that she would be due for promotion as soon as one of the housemaids got married. Mr Widgery often looked at May. When she was bending down to put something away, or when he passed her on the stairs, he would give her one of his quick, dark looks, and in those quick, dark looks Rose felt that she could sense Mr Widgery's admiration of May, and his determination to single her out for promotion as soon as he could.

"Rose, I think I dropped my handkerchief on the stairs. Would you be a dear?"

Rose ran up the stairs as fast as she could. It was on one of the upper landings where she and May had been making beds. May could make a bed look so neat, and so exact, that you couldn't have dreamt that anyone slept in it. She had a

way of folding the top sheet and pressing down the edge so that it looked as if she had straightened it with a rule. And she could twitch a cover, or plump a pillow so that it looked a picture.

Rose was thinking over May's bed-making, and how best she could emulate her, and how much she wished she had blonde hair like May, when she heard Mr Widgery's voice.

"Come here, you little slut," he was saying.

Rose froze. Poor May was in trouble, the way Lottie had been. Mr Widgery sounded dreadful.

"Come here, you little slut," he said again, "I've been watching you, waggling yourself around the servants' hall, cavorting in front of the footmen. Women like you should be strung up, do you hear?"

"Yes, Mr Widgery."

"I would take great pleasure in stringing a woman like you from a tree, did you know that?"

"No, Mr Widgery."

There was a silence. Rose's heart beat faster. She heard Mr Widgery make a funny noise. It sounded as if he was panting, and then he appeared to whisper 'please, please' several times. Rose wanted to laugh. What on earth was he doing? May appeared to be saying nothing. Perhaps she wanted to laugh too? She couldn't wait to ask her what had happened, but when she saw her half an hour later, something stopped her. There was a look on May's face that she hadn't seen before, as if she wanted to be sick.

"Here's your handkerchief, May," Rose whispered at the earliest opportunity.

May took it, and said nothing. Rose hoped that she hadn't hurt her feelings.

Later, May said "Men!" That was all she said, but for a second her lip curled in such a way that she looked quite hard, and the eyes that were normally so bright blue looked cloudy with disgust. "They're filthy creatures."

"Nothing's 'happened', has it, May?" Rose put her hand on her arm.

"No, nothing's 'happened' to me. I'm not going to go catching scarlet fever, if that's what you mean."

"You're so pretty May, you have to be careful, being as pretty as you are."

May shook the hand from her arm impatiently.

"One day I'm going to be someone, one day some dirty old butler won't be allowed to come sniffing round my petticoats, because if he does I'll kick him in the teeth."

Rose looked at May in awe. She wished she had May's spirit, May's dash, and May's daring. And even more she wished that she could look as pretty as May, and that her hair was blonde like May's, and that she had big blue eyes like May, in fact as Rose admitted to herself sometime later, she would dearly have loved to have been born May, and not Rose.

May's background was somewhat mysterious. She never spoke of it to anyone. She was London born, but she had arrived at Southwold from another country estate, sent on recommendation of a friend of the Countess'. Whether she liked to pretend she was mysterious, or whether she was ashamed of where she came from, Rose couldn't find out, but once or twice she had the impression that May's early life had not been easy, or as May said 'being brought up hard makes you hard.'

Rose wondered what Mr Widgery had done to May, but she didn't ask her any more about it, and anyway she had to lay Hodges' tea.

Rose admired Miss Hodges, not just because she was a lady's maid, but because Miss Hodges was a person of firm opinions. Even Mr Widgery was treated with some disdain by Miss Hodges. An ignorant male, a creature who couldn't tell taffeta from grosgrain.

The Earl was a person who never entered Miss Hodges' orb, and whenever he did, it had to be admitted, he did little to heighten Miss Hodges' respect for the male species. It was obvious that, like Mr Widgery, the Earl was yet another poor creature unable to distinguish good from bad, and completely incapable of noticing even such trifling details about the Countess as a change of hairstyle, or even, it sometimes seemed to Miss Hodges, whether or not she was in a ball gown or an afternoon dress. The Earl was head of

Southwold, lord of all he surveyed, but in Miss Hodges' opinion he was to be pitied.

"I think His Lordship is a little shortsighted," she murmured on occasions when like today, she had worked especially hard on the Countess' appearance.

"He can shoot straight," said Nanny loyally. She was on a short visit to Southwold, from Lady Marjorie's house in Eaton Place, and in a loyal mood, "and there's nothing wrong with either Hugo's or Marjorie's eyes."

"Yes, but that's different," Miss Hodges sighed, because Nanny's loyalty depressed her.

She departed to lay out the Countess' evening gown. A delightful confection, in her opinion, of satin swept to each side and pinned with black humming birds on each shoulder. After Nanny's remark, Miss Hodges hoped that His Lordship would not take a shot at them.

Rose was always disappointed by Miss Hodges' evening departure. She felt that by being near Miss Hodges, and by listening to her, something of Miss Hodges' elevated position at Southwold would rub off on her. And then she wanted to learn what Miss Hodges' secret was. What had made Miss Hodges what she was? How did you graduate to being a lady's maid? Or, indeed, did you graduate at all? Was it necessary to be something more than Rose herself was, the simple daughter of the Lodge Keeper? All these questions enthralled her so much that she didn't notice that Nanny had been staring at her for some time.

"Are you Lucy Buck's daughter? Come here, girl, I can't quite make you out in that light. Why, I'd swear you were Lucy Buck's daughter."

"Yes, I am, thank you, Miss."

Rose felt totally confused by this sudden interest from Nanny, and at the same time realised that she didn't know whether or not Nanny was in fact a 'missus' or a 'miss.' Mrs Amey being traditionally a 'Miss' who was always known by the courtesy title of 'Mrs'. To her relief Nanny, however, appeared not to be listening to Rose's mumblings.

"I thought my eyes couldn't deceive me with those looks. You're no farm labourer's daughter, you're Lucy Buck's child.

I could have seen that any day of the week. So you've come to work at Southwold, have you?"

Rose nodded.

"Well, you'll have a hard time of it no doubt, as all the young girls do, but if you keep your head and mind your manners you'll last as long as your mother did, God Rest Her Soul, for she was surely one of the best that ever walked through the servants' hall and a great favourite of the old Countess, God Rest Her Soul, too."

Mrs Amey looked uneasily at Nanny after her last remarks. All this 'God Resting' this and 'God Resting' that smacked too much of Popery and other nonsense as far as she was concerned, but Nanny was Nanny when all was said and done, and the Countess abided by anything she said, as far as the welfare of Hugo and Marjorie was concerned. To this very day Hugo could only be quieted by Nanny if he took it into his head to be off in one of his sulks, and that was a fact that everyone knew of.

"I remember when your mother came to this village," Nanny looked at Mrs Amey, "and you remember when she came to this village, don't you, Jane?"

Mrs Amey looked uncomfortable at Nanny addressing her by her Christian name in front of an under-housemaid, but she nodded quickly, because she respected Nanny, if only for the length of time she had been at Southwold.

"She came to this village on foot. She had run away from the orphanage, they said, and no-one would have helped her if it hadn't been for the old Countess. That morning, on one of her whims, she had decided to take a drive and stop off to buy some sweets for the village children.

"At least, she sent poor old Madame Vilanova in for the sweets, and herself sat outside in her carriage. And who should pass by but your mother, and as the old Countess said to me herself later, some people can judge a horse at twenty yards, and she, it appeared, could judge a maid at thirty. And heavens above, if she didn't that minute, there and then in the middle of the village, engage your mother to become her maid."

There was a silence as Rose imagined what she had just

been told, and Nanny, knowing that she had the ears of her audience, supped her tea and then continued.

"Naturally, the Countess herself was horrified, but she was well accustomed to the old lady's fancies so she said nothing, thinking that before very long young Lucy Buck would give herself away and rile the old lady so she would be rid of her soon enough, no doubt. But no such thing happened.

"Eventually, Lucy was the only maid that the old lady would tolerate, besides poor old Madame. It seemed to me sometimes that she knew what the old lady's whims were going to be before the old lady knew them herself, and so in the end even the Countess grew to be grateful for her. In my opinion it was a sign of how fond of her she was that she consented to her marriage. And when Lucy died, why the old lady never quite got over it. 'Poor little Lucy' she would say, so often to Daisy, 'Poor little Lucy.' Still, that's the way things are. Women are born to suffer, so they say."

No-one in the room cared to disagree with the statement since they were all women, and because it was so obviously true. Women were born to suffer.

Rose looked at Nanny and Mrs Amey. They hadn't suffered because they'd been sensible. They hadn't made the mistake of getting married. They were able to sit drinking their tea and eating their cake in a lovely warm room with a pretty tablecloth, because they had had the good sense to stay in service and not to get married.

Later, when she was able to talk to May, she said, "I'm never going to get married, are you, May?"

May shook her head.

"Marriage is for fools."

"I want to be in service all my life, May, I do. I want to be," Rose paused before allowing herself to reveal her ambition, "I want to be a lady's maid."

She hoped that May wouldn't laugh at what she had said because the idea of little Rose Buck, not yet fifteen, becoming a lady's maid, when all she had ever known was the country, was laughable. In fact, as soon as she had named her ambition Rose saw just how laughable it might seem to other people, so she wasn't exactly surprised when May did laugh. At least,

May's mouth laughed, but her eyes didn't. Her eyes, as always, were saying something else.

"You haven't much ambition have you, Rose? No, what you might call, *real* ambition, have you? You want to be a lady's maid? You really want to be someone like Miss Hodges, sitting all day sewing on buttons or waiting up for Her Ladyship to return from a party? Is that what you think life's about? Well, I don't know."

Rose blushed scarlet. She wished to goodness she hadn't said anything. May always succeeded in making her feel stupid.

"What do you think life's about, May?"

"I don't know, Rose," said May grimly, "but I'm sure what it's *not* about, at least not for me it isn't."

Claude, one of the footmen, passed them. May watched him, "He's another, that one. Always giving himself airs and graces, when he's really just an old man pretending to be young."

After that they separated quickly. It wasn't good to be seen talking, even below stairs, or anywhere. Perhaps because of the Earl's love of seclusion, it was inevitable that everywhere there was the rule of silence, except when at table, and even then May and Rose could only speak after the vegetables. So conversation during the working day was something to be snatched, and held in whispers.

At table, the talk was confined to the older staff holding forth and the junior staff listening dutifully. This was not only because the younger servants felt self-conscious about talking in front of the others, but because Mr Widgery's dark personality dominated the long table.

He would place himself and Mrs Petifor at either end of the table, rather as if they were the Earl and Countess, but unlike the Earl, who was in the habit of propping up a book next to his place if his wife and he were dining alone, Mr Widgery watched everyone who sat at his table with the eyes of a man who, while knowing that this was a time for staff to relax, nevertheless would make a note of any person who took it into his or her head to disagree with him, or even voice an opinion with which he was not in sympathy.

His staff knew this and it was an unspoken law that any new junior servant who had the temerity to pipe up at table was given a sharp kick on the ankle and a crisp warning later. And if they valued their job it was something that they did not do again.

The result of the imposition of so much discipline on even talk at table was that the younger members of the staff were very inclined to giggle at the slightest provocation.

"These are very tasty parsnips. Most tasty, do you not think so Mrs Petifor? I should say so."

Mr Widgery looked down the table at Mrs Petifor.

"I like a parsnip almost as much as I like a marrow," agreed Mrs Petifor, "but then I like a carrot more than any of them. Carrots are most felicitous."

Mr Widgery did not betray the fact that 'felicitous' was a word that he had not, as yet, come across. He hadn't, of course, omitted to search Debrett's for 'abnegation', but he was sorry to say, without any reward. He made a mental note to seek both 'abnegation' and 'felicitous' in His Grace's dictionary when he had a moment alone in the library.

There was a pause in the conversation, everyone having been defeated by Mr Widgery's effort. Parsnips and carrots were not the kind of subjects that made the imagination race and certainly there were no minds racing in either one direction or another, only a healthy sound of eating.

Miss Hodges, like the rest of the company, found Mr Widgery's topic of conversation not only boring but vulgar. She didn't think it at all proper to discuss food at table, in fact she had always been brought up not to.

"The Countess informs me that there are some young ladies from Apton coming across to dine when the young Viscount comes down next month."

This was another non sequitur, since none of the servants dining knew what they should say in reply to this. They all knew that the son and heir to Southwold was expected to be visiting next month, but they had no idea what they should say to the fact that some young ladies had been invited to dine with him.

Eventually Mrs Amey said, "it was so nice to see Nanny, even for such a short visit."

"The young Viscount is all the rage in town, I believe."

Miss Hodges had ignored Mrs Petifor's remark, because she did not think it quite nice to discuss other members of the staff, particularly when she could be discussing members of the Upper Class.

"I always think he looks a picture in his riding clothes," Mrs Amey helped herself to some more parsnips. "He's a chip off the old block. The spit of his grandfather I should say. The absolute spit."

It was time for Mr Widgery to butt in. He did not like to hear Mrs Amey, however good her cooking might be, discussing in front of the younger servants, the fact that the Viscount was the 'spit' of his grandfather. Everyone knew that his grandfather had been a great lover of the ladies and that it was only the old Countess with her fiery temper and her wild Russian ways who had been able to keep him on the straight and narrow. Rumour had it that she had once threatened him with a gun because he had been somewhat taken by a young lady in the neighbourhood.

In his mind Mr Widgery shivered. There was no sight more terrifying than a woman with a gun. Any man met at the door by a woman with a gun had his sympathy. He looked down the length of the table. There was some disturbance. What's more it looked to him as if one of the under-housemaids was giggling. He frowned at her. She caught his look, and tried to stop. Mr Widgery made a mental note to watch her work. There was nothing he hated more than to see the younger staff smiling and laughing. Just as if they were at Southwold to enjoy themselves. He sat back and focused his attention on Mrs Amey's discussion with Mrs Petifor. They were still at it.

"In my opinion the young man should settle down as soon as possible. Gadding about never did any young man the slightest good and only serves to get him into bad habits."

The discussion had grown into almost open criticism of the son and heir to Southwold. Mr Widgery saw that it really was time for him to interrupt.

"I always think—"

But no-one was fated to hear what Mr Widgery thought because quite suddenly he leapt to his feet, and screamed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The fact that Mr Widgery had a terror of spiders was now known to everyone, and it was something that Mr Widgery realised that he would have to live with. If his soul had never been the essence of love, now it was seething with the opposite to that virtue. For a butler to have to be revived in the steward's room by two giggling footmen was not only shaming, it was degrading.

It wasn't as if the matter could have rested at Southwold either, or that only his employers would have got to hear of the incident. By now he knew the whole village would be laughing at the story.

Day after day, he watched the laughter being suppressed behind the servants' eyes. Even the tradesmen, it seemed to him, looked at him with their mockery thinly disguised. It was enough to drive a man to seek solace in the gin bottle, except that he was not especially partial to alcohol. (This fact having commended him particularly to the Earl's attention, because there is nothing more irritating than to find that your butler has been knocking off some of your best claret.) Even after some days had elapsed since the incident, Mr Widgery imagined he could still hear the footmens' giggles as he came round and the noise gave him sleepless nights. He vowed he would get his revenge, but he knew that it was impossible. Just as it is impossible to imprison vast numbers of protesting people, so it is impossible, even if you are a butler, to punish the whole staff.

However, if leniency towards his staff had never been one of his practices, now he was the epitome of the avenging angel, complete with sword to strike down the ungodly or those who paused for a minute while in the throes of their duties. He found dust where there was none, dirt where there had never been any, and fault with everyone.

Mrs Petifor and Mrs Amey, and naturally Miss Hodges, were not victims of his new policy, because it was difficult for him to find fault with *their* work, but nevertheless they were made to feel most uncomfortable, and since they knew that Mr Widgery had his Lordship's ear, on account of his impeccable record, even they were afraid to voice any kind of protest at the sullen atmosphere that now pertained below stairs.

Rose's only respite in her long and arduous day was when she served them their tea, and although she could not enter into their conversations, nevertheless she heartily agreed with their sentiments.

"I think Mr Widgery is a little exacting to expect the footmen to polish their buttons every day, do you not, Mrs Petifor?" said Miss Hodges.

"He is a perfectionist, so he tells us. However I think that perfection can sometimes lead to perfidy."

"Very near," Miss Hodges nodded approvingly at Mrs Petifor.

She respected Mrs Petifor's use of words. Education made such a difference to people. It took intelligence to know how to apply polish.

"I think Mr Widgery has the idea that someone—"

"Yes, yes," Miss Hodges agreed hastily, and frowned at the same time to try to warn Mrs Petifor not to say anything too much in front of Rose.

"I don't imagine that anyone would do that. I mean, who would have *known* of his fear? We certainly did not."

Mrs Petifor was impervious to frowns.

"I set out the puddings with my own hands, and I never saw a spider. In my opinion it must have crawled under the lid, or some such, while they were waiting in the pantry. That's my opinion."

Everyone had heard Mrs Amey's opinion of the incident more than several times now.

"And then none of the footmen could have put it there, seeing as they were all busy elsewhere, and there's not one *girl* that I know of that would have the courage to pick up a spider. Girls faint and scream at spiders, everyone knows that,

the same as they do at mice. It's unheard of for a woman to touch a spider."

There was a silence as everyone agreed silently with this thought.

"It's so *unusual* to see a man faint," Miss Hodges bit delicately into a biscuit, a satisfied expression spreading over her face at the memory.

"I've never seen anyone fall like that, or heard a scream to match it," Mrs Amey enthused.

She had, of course, but they all loved to dwell on the subject of Mr Widgery's spectacular faint. Nothing exciting had happened for a long time, at least not since a few months ago when someone had fallen into the village pond and drowned after rather too long a sojourn at the Southwold Arms.

"Rose, will you fetch some more biscuits, please?"

Rose knew she was being sent out of the room, so that they could talk some more about Mr Widgery without her hearing. She didn't mind, because it seemed to her that she had heard enough of Mr Widgery fainting to last her a lifetime. Even her father talked about it if he was still up when she got home. That was the trouble with the country. Nothing much happened. If you were even just an underhousemaid in town you would be bound to have a more exciting life.

However, the incident of Mr Widgery's faint passed out of the servants' gossip when it was superseded by a new piece of information. That the young Viscount was not *coming* down to the country, but being *sent*. All the difference in the world, as everyone down to the scullery maids knew. Apparently—this was according to May who had got it from Claude—apparently his being the rage of the town was one thing, but he had got into debt besides, in spite of his generous allowance, and it was considered prudent that he should have a sojourn in the country and, as the Countess had been overheard to remark to one of her more intimate friends, "There's nothing like giving the boy *no* temptations, is there?"

In the Countess' view the country was devoid of all diversions. If she could find very little to occupy her when at Southwold, she was certain that it would be quite impossible for Hugo to get up to mischief. She considered, and her

husband agreed, that being away from town and temptation for a few months would most probably settle Hugo down better than anything.

The prospect of having her son to amuse her at dinner, instead of continually having to try to attract her husband's attention by conversation, was pleasant to the Countess. Hugo was amusing. He might be a bit of a scamp, but at least he liked other things beside books. Now Marjorie had children it was difficult for her to get down to Southwold as often as she had, and the Countess found country life even duller than before, if that were possible.

Of course, it was all her husband's fault. He didn't take any interest in anything, not even in the rose garden, and yet he expected her to fill in her time, just as if he was willing to accompany her everywhere, which of course he wasn't. She supposed that if she had his every meal sent into the library on a tray, she would quite probably never set eyes on him at all. It wasn't as if she was yet in her dotage either. The Countess touched her immaculate coiffure. Although her hair suffered from being frizzy, nevertheless Hodges always managed to make a good job of it. Making good jobs of things was something that Miss Hodges prided herself on, and the reason why the Countess put up with her silly ways.

If the Countess was looking forward to the young Viscount Ashby's visit, so were the staff of Southwold. The atmosphere below stairs lifted the nearer it got to the date of his arrival. Everyone liked to hear, or see, young people, and although the Earl and Countess weren't old, they weren't young either, and it was a long time since there had been a bit of gaiety, since His Lordship was somewhat set in his ways to say the least.

"Here, my girl! Get polishing at once."

Mr Widgery had crept up behind Rose, as she stood in the room known as the Great Ante Room. She had been detailed to go there, clear out the grate, and start polishing the floor. Naturally having finished the grate, she had stood up and gazed round her, since it was the first time that she had ever been in this part of the house.

"Sorry, Mr Widgery."

"Get going, girl, the Viscount arrives this evening and Her

Ladyship wants every part of this place as shiny and as polished as the day it was laid. I should say."

"Yes, Mr Widgery."

"Where's that other girl, you know the one I mean?"

Mr Widgery made a gallant attempt to pretend that he didn't.

"May, sir? Why, she's next door, sir, finishing the grate there, and then she's going to join me here sir. We're going to do the floor."

Rose put down her kneeler and started to polish the floor. She pretended not to notice Mr Widgery creeping next door to the Music Room, but she couldn't stop herself going to the door and listening.

"Why, Mr Widgery, what *can* you be wanting?" She heard May saying. "You'll have to be a much better boy before I allow any of that nonsense, won't you?" Again Mr Widgery murmured 'please, please', as he had done before.

Rose's eyes widened. May hated Mr Widgery. She hated him as much or more than the rest of the staff hated him. Yet here she was calling him a 'boy', and carrying on as if—as if she liked him. There was a sound of a slight scuffle, and May giggling.

Rose quickly returned to her kneeler. She didn't want them suddenly coming in, or hearing her outside the door.

A little later, May joined her.

"Scum," she said shortly, after she and Rose had been polishing for some time. "They never have anything else on their minds, men don't. You should see the scum that used to visit my mother. You wouldn't have bought an apple off them, let alone let them—" she paused, "but she, poor woman—she had me and me brothers, and how else could she live?"

"Does Mr Widgery kiss you, May?" Rose felt embarrassed to ask May such a question, but her curiosity overcame her.

"No, he doesn't kiss me, Rose. He wants more than kissing, much more than kissing.'

They polished for a little while more in silence. And then May said, "Some day I'm going to be in there with them, Rose, some day I am, you know."

Rose's eyes opened wide. She respected May's determina-

tion. She was sure that what May said she was going to do, she'd do.

"Perhaps you'll marry well, May?"

"Nothing less than a knight will do for me," May laughed. "No dirty old butlers, thank you very much. Still, I got my own back on him all right. You see, that's what you've got to be in this life, Rose, if you're going to survive. Fly and quick, and you've got to notice things. The way I noticed that dirty bastard's terrified of spiders."

"It was you!"

That morning Rose's respect for May grew to Olympian heights.

That evening the Viscount Ashby arrived.

His mother greeted him in the hall.

She had had Hodges lay out one of her most elegant confections. When she was happy she looked almost beautiful.

"Hugo!"

"Mama! You're looking wonderful."

The convention was so secure that neither of them, while they greeted each other with restrained enthusiasm, care to mention, or forsaw a time when they would mention, the fact that Hugo was not at Southwold of his own volition. The family lawyer might wring his hands at the enormity of his debts, but his parents could be relied upon not to introduce the subject within his hearing.

The Countess was so delighted to see her son that she forgot to be displeased when she saw that he had brought someone else with him, without having had the forethought to tell her. And Hugo, knowing that his mother would be pleased to see him, had waved aside any thought of letting the Countess know that he intended to bring his friend, Charles Littleton, with him.

Charles, like himself, was in a spot of trouble. In fact, he was not just in one spot of trouble, but rather more than one. He had certainly been pushing his luck as far as his funds were concerned, but more than that, he had gone a little too far with a certain gentleman's delicious wife, and when it had been broken to him by Hugo that he had been more or less ordered to Southwold for an enforced holiday, Charles

had deemed it wise to accompany his friend to pastures new, even though pastures of the kind that contained buttercups and daisies bored him to ribbons.

Hugo and Charles had been friends since they were both little brutes together at Eton. They had for some time run rival gangs at that establishment, but the rivalry had ceased once they found they had a common interest along with other young men of their age group and position, that of horses and women, and most properly, their interest in both sports was strictly in that order.

Luckily, for her own peace of mind, the Countess did not see standing in front of her two young men who had been busy getting up to no good in the metropolis, but rather she saw her dear Hugo, so tall and handsome, and his friend Charles, who was such a nice boy and always had such nice manners when he was a little boy, both come to stay at Southwold and divert her from the tedium of country life. Of course, when her husband had been active in politics she had been glad to get down to Southwold and loved the peace of the great house as opposed to the busy life of the politician's wife. But, since his premature retirement from that field (and goodness knows, everyone knew that he could have been Prime Minister if he had wanted) she had resented his addiction to Southwold more and more. She thought he had taken to the country and to his books and his cataloguing in the kind of spirit that other people might not understand. It was almost as if he had been disgraced in politics, instead of just not wanting to make the final fence and pass the finishing post ahead of the rest.

Of course, she had never argued with him. It had seemed to her that another man's wife might have. Another man's wife might have even collapsed from boredom, but she had refused to be as other men's wives, mostly because she knew the Talbot-Careys far too well. She knew that once one of them made up their minds about something, there was very little use in trying to dissuade them, very little use indeed. Her father-in-law, a man of great charm, who had put up with his Russian wife's tempers with remarkable fortitude, never could be moved on a point, once he had made his decision.

The old Countess had even been known to hurl things at him, so put out would she be at times by his stubborn attitude, but to no avail. And, like his son, it was impossible for anyone to bring up the subject ever again in his presence if he did not wish to discuss it. It wasn't that they would remark on it, or even become bad-tempered. They simply did not appear to hear what you said. It was maddening sometimes, particularly in relation to something you had quite set your heart on. But there you were, life was by no means easy.

"Hugo was very naughty not to have let you know," Charles Littleton smiled down at her, and the Countess noted how sparkling and white his teeth were, and how black and thick his hair was. It curled round the back of his neck with a seduction that was an art in itself.

"Yes, he is naughty," the Countess agreed, but it was quite evident that she was only too pleased to have the company of not one young man, but two.

"Here's Widgery," Hugo winked at Charles. He had already warned him what an old codger Widgery was, but you could always get round him. "Widgery, Mr Littleton is staying. He hasn't brought his valet with him, but you'll fix him up, won't you?"

Widgery was sure that he would be able to fix Mr Littleton up in the way that most people are sure that they will be able to swim once they've been pushed in. The fact that it meant re-arranging the table, making up a new bedroom, airing a bed, detailing Martin to valet for him, and generally shifting the emphasis of the next few weeks to having not just the young Viscount, but his friend, and no doubt soon enough some members of the opposite sex entertaining themselves round the house, was not merely irritating, but maddening to a man of such precision as himself. He didn't mind what he did so long as he knew what he was about. He liked to know what he was about because, in his opinion, if *he* didn't know what he was about then no-one at Southwold would, and it would only be a matter of hours before the whole place would be in chaos.

"May! Rose! Upstairs and make up the Blue Room for Mr Littleton."

"Has he brought no manservant with him? How extremely lackadaisical."

Mrs Petifor liked a bit of excitement. Something going wrong was always of interest to her, but she was disappointed that there was no manservant to expect in the servants hall. Particularly since the guest was only an 'esquire'. It wasn't often that a person of her upbringing could prove to outsiders what it was to *be* a person of a certain upbringing, but on the rare occasion that there were guests and their servants at Southwold, she was presented with ample opportunity to do just this.

Mr Widgery glanced at Mrs Petifor briefly. Sometimes he felt that she added tone to his staff, but tonight he felt nothing but impatience towards her. 'Lackadaisacal' was another of those words that he felt sure that she made up. He had once searched her room for a dictionary, convinced that if she didn't make up her vocabulary then she must be learning a new word every day in order to annoy and distress him. When he had found no dictionary he had again become convinced that she was making words up.

Mrs Amey grumbled into her cooking pots. It was a good thing that the menu tonight was perfectly suited to accommodating another diner, but not thanks to anyone letting her know.

Rose followed May upstairs. Mrs Petifor would be up in a minute to supervise them, but until she arrived they had time, while taking down some clean sheets and preparing to make up the Blue Room, to whisper together.

"Have you seen the young Viscount before, Rose?"

"Of course, May. Why, I've even danced with him."

For the first time since they had met, May looked at Rose with envy. She had never danced with anything you could call a man, let alone a gentleman, let alone a real Viscount.

"It was on the occasion of Lady Marjorie's wedding celebrations. It was wonderful, May. Everyone danced with everyone, and there were candles everywhere, and I danced with Viscount Ashby himself, and I wasn't more than twelve. It was wonderful, May."

"Still, you were probably too young to appreciate it, Rose.

I should say twelve was far too young to appreciate a Viscount. Most definitely. It wasn't as if you were a woman then, Rose. Dancing when you're a woman is quite different. We danced at Christmas at my last place; they gave a servants' ball every year. You don't have servants' balls here, do you? This place is rather dull for young people—compared to where I was before with Mrs Langston-Smith."

Rose couldn't help feeling irritated with this remark. It was all very well for May with her blonde looks and her wonderful eyes to keep on about her last place, but everyone knew that the Langston-Smiths had sent May to Southwold because they were very rich, but had no title, and if you had no title, you always wanted to be friendly with those who had. And the Langston-Smiths could be as grand and as rich as they liked, but they would never equal Southwold, because Southwold had what you couldn't buy. It had history.

"Well, May, I don't know about not being a woman, but dancing with a Viscount is not something that happens to everyone," Rose said this quite firmly, and May looked at her surprised.

"Perhaps so."

She was shrewd enough to know that if she wanted to keep her position of power over Rose, she would do well not to belittle her experience. And anyway, there was no doubt about the fact that what Rose said was true, dancing with a Viscount was—dancing with a Viscount—and it didn't matter what age you were when you did it.

May knew she was not, and never could be, jealous of Rose. Rose was thin and dark, and May was rounded and blonde. In short, May knew she was far prettier than Rose, but having heard this previously untold anecdote from her, she resolved that it was something that she had to match. There is nothing quite so galling to someone who is prettier than her friend than to know that she has had an experience of something that she, with her better, prettier looks, has not had.

"Don't you two stand about there," Mrs Petifor ignored the fact that both girls were busying themselves about the room. She pulled back the bed cover to make sure that Mr Littleton's sheets were as they should be. Smooth as a crisp piece

of paper, with the 'S' for Southwold and the coronet embroidered on the top sheet, set firmly in the middle of the bed. She looked through into the dressing room. Martin had brought the young gentleman's effects upstairs and was laying out his evening clothes.

"May, you will heat a stone for Mr Littleton's bed, and both of you will bring up some hot water."

There was nothing Mrs Petifor liked better than supervising the arrangement of a guest's rooms. She made a note in her mind to arrange some flowers for the mantelpiece. Even gentlemen liked flowers in their rooms. And then there was the fire to be seen to. The rooms at Southwold were so large, they needed fires in both summer and winter. She must arrange for May to light Mr Littleton's, and for Rose to attend to the Viscount's. There was so much to do.

The next morning the two girls hovered outside the young men's bedrooms. Although neither of them cared to admit it, they had never cleared a grate in a bedroom belonging to a single man before. They eyed the closed doors with some trepidation. It would be terrible to do anything that might attract attention to themselves, at least in the wrong way.

"Well, I'm off," said May defiantly, and she turned the handle of the door with a firmness she did not feel.

"See you later," Rose whispered, and she went further down the corridor to the Viscount's room. Seeing May disappearing gave her courage. If May had gone in, then she would too.

The room was lit only by the bedside light, and although it was summer, the curtains were still drawn because Hugo hated to see the light too soon, and yet he liked to be awakened early with a cup of tea and a biscuit, so that he could enjoy the very fact of lying in bed doing nothing in particular, except perhaps turn over in his mind the events of the evening before, if there had been any; or if there hadn't been anything in particular, then he liked to try to remember pieces of poetry that he had been made to memorise at Eton, or try translating pieces of one of the books on the bedside table into Latin. It had been a habit with him since school.

This morning, as Rose pushed open the door, he was busy thinking about his parents, and about Southwold, and the fact that when all was said and done, although life in the country could be very dull, it was better than nothing, and anyway it probably was just as well to be away from town at this moment. He was glad to see his mother was looking pretty, and his father had been really quite witty at dinner. He was amused that even Charles was a little in awe of him; even Charles, who appeared not to think very much of anyone except himself.

The door started to open very slowly. Hugo removed his gaze from the ceiling, and his eyes travelled lazily to the entrance of his bedroom. There was a great deal of floor space between him in his bed and the double doors, one of which was now opening, but even so he could see just how slowly it was opening, as if a very small animal was about to appear. He wanted to laugh, and if Charles had been with him he would have, but laughing on your own was a rather self-conscious experience, so he slid a little further into the bed, and remained silent.

For how long the door proceeded to open inch by inch, he couldn't have said, but by the time it was open, and the person, or door pusher, was half way into the room, his self-control had quite broken down, and he was laughing out loud.

Rose stood inside the door, and blushed to the roots of her hair. For a girl to find herself in the room of a young gentleman alone was an experience in itself, but to find the young Viscount lying in his bed roaring with laughter was simply terrible. For one awful minute she thought her petticoat was showing, or that her hair had fallen down.

"That was so funny," gasped Hugo, "I thought you were a mouse."

Rose was too terrified to reply to this remark. She switched her eyes from the ground to the fireplace and hurried over to it. It was all that she could think of doing. To reply, or make an answer to someone who thought you were a mouse, was not something that she knew how to do. She knelt down at the fireplace with her heart beating.

Hugo stopped laughing, and lay back on his pillows. Ever

since he could remember this was one of the sights that he had always woken up to at Southwold. The maid kneeling down to light the fire in his bedroom. The little glimpse of black stocking as she bent to her work, and her white cap and black dress outlined against the red wallpaper. It was a sight so familiar that he had rarely ever thought about it, but today he noticed the procedure, as if he had never seen it before. If absence from Southwold had made him look with new eyes at its beauties, now he looked at its comforts with the same surprise. It was very agreeable.

Rose stood up, and turned to go. She hadn't made a sound, hardly a sound, as she had cleared out the grate and lit the fire. She thought that the young Viscount must have been laughing at a book he was reading, because she was now quite sure that neither her petticoat was showing, nor her hair was hanging down, so there could not be any other explanation.

Hugo watched her from his bed, as a marksman watches his bird, before he takes aim. He had been having a bet with himself as to whether or not he could remember the name of the maid. He hadn't been able to catch sight of her face, before she had knelt down by the fireside, and now she was turning to go he looked at her quickly, to see if he had been right. He had thought the waist too trim to be Daisy, and the hair too dark to be Rosalind, and now he saw that he was right in the first instance, but wrong in the idea that it was Margaret. It was someone younger than Margaret, and also prettier, he was surprised to see.

"What's your name?" he asked, and then he said, "I've never seen you before."

Rose's pale face went pink again. She didn't think it would be right to say that he had seen her before, and even danced with her, so she said nothing, and then after a minute because she realised that he had asked her a question, she suddenly said, in little more than a whisper, "Rose."

"What was that you said?" Hugo leant forward from his pillows to try to catch what she had said, "what was that you said?"

"Rose, mi'lord."

"Ah, Rose, I thought I hadn't seen you before."

This constant reference to not having seen her before was more than Rose could stand.

"You have, mi'lord, once at Lady Marjorie's celebrations for her wedding, you danced with me."

Hugo stared at her in surprise. It was amazing what servants insisted on remembering. They would know what you wore on such and such an occasion, and who came to stay last year, and how old your mother was, and how many years your nanny had been in service, all sorts of things that you yourself never gave a thought to, and yet they had no brains to speak of. Or at least if they did it would have to be a different kind of brain. The kind of brain that remembers things, but then can do nothing with what it remembers.

"I danced with you, did I?"

Rose looked down at the carpet. She knew by the Viscount's tone that she had stepped out of line. Her knees felt like water. Supposing he told Mr Widgery that she had been answering him back, and that she had made conversation when she shouldn't? She would undoubtedly be dismissed, like Lottie had been. Only, thank goodness, her father wasn't like Big Jim. He would be sad to see her home, and not get her wages, but he wouldn't thrash her.

"I danced with a lot of—with a great deal of people at my sister's wedding celebrations," he stopped himself from saying, as he had begun to, 'a lot of servants'. He didn't know why but he thought it might be slightly distasteful to call a servant a servant to her face, particularly when the servant was as pretty as the one standing in front of him.

Rose was so relieved that he had answered her, instead of ringing the bell for Mr Widgery, that she hastily bobbed a curtsy, and started to hurry out of the room.

The way she did so seemed so comical to Hugo, and again so like a mouse, that he started to laugh again.

Rose didn't stop, she kept on going, and quickly shut the door behind her. She didn't care what happened, or how much he laughed at her, just so long as she could get away quickly, and hope that he wouldn't complain that she had been rude. She hurried down the corridor, and as she did so, she was met by May, who was looking if not exactly triumphant, then very pleased with herself.

Hugo lay back against the pillows. Any minute now Martin would come in, and he would have to start dressing; still, there was the pleasant prospect of breakfast in the dining room. He liked to eat a good breakfast. Tomorrow he would go riding before breakfast, then he would enjoy it even more. He might even be able to drag Charles along with him. There was a nice half Arab in the stable called Firefly. He'd give a fair amount of money to see Charles on Firefly, that is if he had time to see him before Firefly flung him off.

"Charles," Hugo glanced sideways at his friend, "I can see you have been enjoying yourself."

They had breakfasted with the Countess in the Dining Room, helping themselves to the dishes laid out on the heavy mahogany sideboard. His mother had changed most of the eighteenth century furniture in the dining room, and replaced it with something more fashionable. Hugo had liked the older furniture better, but she had had her way and put it around the house—some in the Music Room, some upstairs in the Long Gallery, and other pieces in the Great Ante Room.

"What are you boys going to amuse yourselves at today?" the Countess had looked with pleasure at the two young men sitting on either side of her, and eating their breakfast with evident enjoyment. She herself ate hardly anything, but it was always wonderful to see the young enjoying themselves.

"We thought we might go riding, Mama."

It was then that Hugo had noticed that Charles had a light in his eye that had not been there since before he had become involved with that poor little man's wife. The light in Charles' eye reflected mischief, and more often than not, mayhem. Usually Hugo enjoyed seeing it there, but he couldn't help feeling nervous at this particular moment in his life. He wasn't a funk, at least he thought he wasn't, but he knew that if he got into any more trouble his parents could well become irritated with him. At this particular moment they were humouring him, taking him away from temptation, but not really punishing him. However, if he pushed his luck too hard, things might change.

"Charles, I have a good mount for you, something you'll really enjoy."

"Really, Hugo?"

The light was still there.

Hugo hoped he imagined it. After all, there was nothing to do at Southwold, except ride or shoot, or hunt, according to the season, none of which sports Charles particularly favoured. Charles' favourite sport was quite different.

CHAPTER NINE

Rose and May were able, if they were lucky, to arrange to have their time off together and it had become something of a habit for Rose to take May down to the Lodge. When she saw May with her family it seemed to her that just for a few hours May's eyes would soften and her whole manner changed when she played with Tim and Tatty in the garden, or talked to Mary in the kitchen.

The situation between Rose and her stepmother had improved, not only because Rose was now up working at the big house all day, but also because Mary had shown such patience and sweetness towards Rose's grandmother now she was bedridden. Secretly Rose wondered how Mary could be quite so patient, running up and down the narrow wooden stairs all day long in answer to the old lady shouting for her. And once or twice she even imagined that her grandmother had become bedridden on purpose, just so that she could make Mary run up and downstairs. Just so that she could cling to what little power she had left, even if it was only the power of an invalid.

The young Viscount had been at Southwold for some weeks before they were able to have any time off, on account of the fact that Mrs Petifor had been 'incapacitated' as she liked to put it—although the rest of the staff were quite happy to think of her as being ill. Anne always took Mrs Petifor's place if she was unwell and she had been unable to give them any free time on account of the fact that she was short-handed, even if it was only by one.

Everything had to be done twice as quickly to satisfy Anne, since she was inclined to be over-eager as acting housekeeper. She expected fires to be lit, beds to be made, and floors polished twice as fast, and twice as well, as even Mrs Petifor's exacting standards.

Rose and May's routine had become well estabilshed since the advent of the young Viscount and his friend, Mr Littleton. Their mornings started off with cleaning out the grates and lighting the fires in the young gentlemen's rooms, and even though Anne was so exacting and punctilious about everything, she did not dare to penetrate either of the young men's bedrooms in the early morning to see if they were doing their work properly. This meant that for a short twenty minutes every day there was some light relief going on in both the Viscount's room and the Blue Bedroom next door.

"Good morning, Mouse," Hugo looked over the top of his book at Rose, and Rose as usual blushed and tried not to laugh.

It was some time since the Viscount had explained to her that she reminded him of a mouse, the way she crept in and out of the room in the mornings.

"Good morning, mi'lord."

"Are you coming to scrabble at my grate again, Mouse?"

"Yes, mi'lord."

"Well, don't scrabble too loudly, Mouse. I am reading and I don't like mice scrabbling too loudly when I'm reading."

"No, mi'lord, I'll try not to, mi'lord."

There was silence as Hugo went on reading, and Rose set to clean out the grate. Then after a few minutes Hugo said, "do you like cleaning out grates, Mouse?"

"Yes, mi'lord."

Hugo looked at Rose's back view, puzzled. Servants were amazing, constantly amazing. How could they possibly like cleaning out grates? Particularly a girl. How could a girl like cleaning out grates and getting her hands dirty. They hated getting anything dirty. Harriet Cadogan was about the only girl he'd ever known who didn't mind getting dirty. He'd seen her wade through mud up to her waist out hunting, just to get her crop or some such thing, and then she'd fling herself up again and carry on just as if she was as fresh as the hour she'd started out. But then Harriet was a madcap, everyone knew that.

"Don't you mind getting your hands dirty, Mouse?"

"No, I don't , mi'lord, not really."

"Wouldn't you like a day when you didn't get your hands dirty?"

"We have time off, mi'lord."

"Do you?"

"Yes, we do, mi'lord."

Rose stood up and bobbed a curtsy, and was gone before Hugo could puzzle out what she had said. Why should time off have anything to do with her hands? After a minute he realised that she had indicated that there was a time when she didn't have to dirty her hands, and because of this she was quite happy. He sighed at the book he was holding. It all went to show just how extraordinary servants were. They were made of stuff that was quite different. Utterly different. And perhaps it was just as well.

"Hugo?"

"Yes, Charles?"

Hugo went on reading.

"Hugo, put your book down at once before I fling it on the fire."

"Charles, you can fling it on the fire, but I do assure you it won't hurt me as much as when Firefly flung you."

"Touché."

For the first time Charles appeared not to mind being reminded of his first disastrous ride at Southwold.

"Hugo, please stop reading, I wish to speak of something of import to you."

"You've been up to something for the last few weeks Charles, and now you're about to tell me about it."

Charles grinned. He was quite accustomed to Hugo's ways with him. Hugo liked to pretend that he was too lazy, and too interested in higher things, to be as heavily engaged with the opposite sex as Charles himself, but Charles knew that Hugo, like most of his own sex, needed but a hint and he could be as easily tempted as a maid.

Downstairs Rose looked at May.

"He's asked us *both* to go walking with him?" She was so excited that she could only whisper.

"That's right," May nodded briskly, "and he's bringing his friend. And we're going to have a picnic."

"May, do we dare?"

"Dare? What's daring about going on a picnic?"

Rose looked at her brushing up her pretty blonde hair on top of her head. They both knew exactly how daring it was to go on a picnic and left to herself, Rose felt that she might have refused. She wavered. May was older. If May thought it was all right perhaps it was. She suddenly thought of something.

"What friend, May?"

"Why the young Viscount, his little lordship himself, that's who."

Rose thought she felt about to faint.

"May, we shouldn't go. If they find out."

"If who finds out? They're going to be careful, don't worry. They're buying all the stuff and meeting us at the Folly."

"But May, supposing someone sees us, supposing someone got to hear. It would be the end."

Rose had lived too long on the edge of a village not to be aware of spies everywhere.

"Listen, no-one's going to see us, it's our half day off. We'll be very careful, now get dressed and stop worrying. Well I never, you're an awful scaredy cat Rose, really you are."

Rose looked at May doubtfully. She hadn't felt so frightened for a long time, not since poor Lottie went.

"May! What shall I wear?"

May looked at her triumphantly. She knew that now there would be no more argument.

"Don't worry, I'll lend you something."

Hugo knew that it was very probable that Charles' plan to picnic with the maids at the Folly was more than, must be more than, a plan to picnic. Charles did not like picnics, or pastoral get-togethers, and it seemed very unlikely that he had just woken up one morning and become filled with a desire to inspect the Folly at close quarters.

Hugo felt that he should deflect Charles in his keen desire to picnic, particularly since the other members of the party promised also to be members of his parents' large staff, but

he couldn't quite think how he could put Charles off. He'd been brought up to respect members of the lower orders, not to 'consort' with them, although at the time of being instructed against 'consorting' he had only a hazy idea of exactly what it embraced. His ideas were now less hazy, but he was basically somewhat lethargic and by the time he realised that Charles might be up to no good at all it was far too late to put him off. The picnic was already packed, and Charles was sniffing the wind like a hound on a frosty morning.

"I say, Charles, you're not up to anything, are you?"

Charles looked at him, and his black eyes sparkled.

"Why, Hugo," he said, "what should I be up to? We're just going to have a picnic in the woods with a couple of innocent young maids."

"Charles, maids have a habit of becoming less innocent when you're around."

"True," Charles sighed, and a twig snapped under his boot as he looked reflectively ahead of them at the woods and the sunny summer morning. "My grandfather, you know, was not allowed any female staff at all towards the end of his life. My grandmother simply would not permit it. He didn't seem to mind if they were ugly either, he just couldn't keep his hands off them. The fact that they were just maids was enough for him."

They made their way through the woods slowly, because the baskets of food and drink that Mrs Amey had made up for them were heavy. Hugo had only ordered picnics for two, because he knew there would be gossip if he had doubled that number. He felt compromised by the fact that he had got to know Rose, albeit out of an innocent motive, as Charles had been getting to know whatever her name was, the other one. It was perhaps because of this that he felt a trifle uneasy about the whole expedition, although, now they were embroiled in it, he couldn't help feeling amused by the idea. It wasn't often that you had the opportunity to picnic with a couple of innocent country girls and, it seemed to him, it would be a wonderful opportunity to get to know the workings of the lower class female mind.

The Folly had been built by his great-great-grandfather, a man of some foresight, who having done the Grand Tour returned to Southwold with fresh ideas on landscaping and gardening. Ideas that were to prove quite novel at the time, but were now accepted as classic. He had built Grecian temples beside the lake that he had moved hills to create and he had planted trees that he never saw as more than saplings, and now they were mighty edifices to his glorious imagination.

Hugo envied the man his ancestor must have been when he stood inside the Folly with its marble columns and gazed out over the lake. He knew that he could not become such a man as he had been, he knew that he lacked his imaginative powers, he knew that his mind was the classic mind, the mind that appreciates precision and understands it, that can admire imagination, but never produce anything imaginative. Because of his precise, exacting mind he knew his own weaknesses the way that he knew his Latin declensions.

"They're not going to come," Charles started to laugh. It was one of his qualities that he had a good sense of humour, but like most men it extended to everything except his horsemanship.

Their voices echoed strangely in the Grecian temple, but it was cool inside, so they sat in its shade and looked out over the lake, neither of them feeling very disappointed at the sudden collapse of their plans. They were young men who knew by now that a disappointment today could always be made up by some new diversion tomorrow and anyway they had been brought up to contemplate and appreciate beauty, so they sat for some half an hour discussing the merits of English gardens as compared to Italian and French. They came to the conclusion that of all countries England was the country that could produce perhaps the best.

"Versailles is too precise. Brilliant but too precise."

"Yes, but then that is the problem with French interiors, they too can be brilliant, yet they cannot produce a sense of gentleness and homeliness the way even the grandest English interior can somehow convey those qualities."

They were enjoying their conversation the way two well-

matched chess players enjoy their game, each knowing that neither was really any more brilliant than the other and so the ultimate victory could only be academic and would not involve any disgrace.

"Hugo, my dear fellow, I do believe I can spy two fat little pigeons making their way towards our Folly."

Charles gazed down the slope to the right of them, and Hugo saw that he was right. The two fat little pigeons, as he had described them, were coming towards them, both now out of their maids' uniforms and looking more like butterflies than pigeons.

"Forgive me interrupting your—what Proudlock used to call—ruminations, Hugo, but our guests sont arrivées, quite, quite unexpectedly."

Charles got to his feet.

Rose looked up towards the Folly. She felt like running away. She had felt like running away ever since she had set out, decked out in May's second best, May's first best very properly sporting itself on May. She knew that they were doing wrong but she couldn't quite work out why she thought they were doing wrong. There were no rules to suggest that maids might not picnic with gentlemen who invited them on their days off, but even if there weren't any rules, Rose still felt that it was wrong.

She also felt almost cross with May for bringing them along the path that led straight up to the Folly instead of through the woods, which although a longer route was nevertheless one which brought them less into view than the pathway. May seemed quite unaware of the possible consequences of being seen by one of the gardeners, or another member of the staff out for a walk. When Rose had argued with her, she had simply tossed her head and said, "I don't mean to get myself hot and flustered scrambling through woods. You go that way, Rose. I'll meet you there."

Of course she knew that Rose wouldn't dare go that way because Rose was afraid of meeting the young gentlemen on her own and anyway it took all Rose's courage just to trot along behind her.

"What are you doing, May?" Rose whispered.

May had licked her finger and was running it over her eyebrows, she also straightened her bonnet and dress.

"Just cooling myself. A lady should never meet a gentleman in a fluster, I read that in a magazine."

Rose looked at May. She was only a couple of years younger than her but she always felt that May was in fact about ten years older. Shrewdly, she wondered if it was the difference between being brought up in the country and the town. So many of May's ways must be town ways, and her eyes were definitely town eyes. They had a look in them that not even Daisy, a quite notorious flirt, could be said to have.

"Why ladies," it looked to both girls as if Mr Littleton was almost bowing to them, just as it looked to Hugo as if Charles was bending down in order to stop himself laughing. "We are so honoured that you care to come to our Folly to lunch with us."

Rose stood directly behind May, hoping that she couldn't be seen. When May bobbed a curtsy she did likewise. She kept her eyes on a piece of stone floor a little way ahead of her and hoped that no-one would notice that she was blushing.

Hugo noticed.

"My friend and I cannot be too honoured by your deigning to visit us."

Even Hugo felt like laughing now. Charles was going it a bit; any minute now they would both be in convulsions. What with the two maids standing there in their simple little rustic frocks and bonnets, and Hugo pretending they were Duchesses at a debutante ball.

"Good morning, mi'lords."

May was clever. She knew that by upgrading Mr Littleton she would flatter him.

"Come, come now, no 'mi'lords' here in this temple dedicated to the Goddess of Nature. Here we are but lads and lasses, as in times gone by, no titles, no lords or ladies, just people."

This was too much for Hugo who walked away from his friend, and gazed intently, if unseeingly, at the words inscribed at the back of the temple. The coolness of the Latin

restored his peace of mind. He did not want to give the game away by laughing, but it was damned difficult. Charles was such a ham. He always did overdo everything.

"Would you like to sit down, May?"

Rose was startled by hearing Mr Littleton call May by her first name. She didn't know why but it sounded strange, particularly when May had her best dress on and they weren't in uniform. Some things were all right in uniform, but not the same out of uniform.

Charles saw Rose's eyes flying to his face and realised both from her frightened look and from the way May drew herself up that he had taken his fantasy too quickly for them. It would have to go slower; the working class mind was always slower. They couldn't catch on to something, or fly to another subject in the way his own class did. But, he was often very sorry to see, this did not stop them from having what he could only describe not too originally as a native shrewdness. Native shrewdness had often got in his way in the past and he saw that if he wasn't too careful it would easily get in his way this afternoon.

"What a beautiful morning it has been, hasn't it? It reminds one of some lines from Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale', do you not think?"

The two girls looked at him doubtfully.

"No, perhaps not, perhaps you're right. More Shelley perhaps?"

"I've never read a great deal of poetry," said May proudly, and she managed to make poetry sound as if it was something slightly improper.

Charles realised that his task was going to be even harder than he had at first thought, but this realisation only fanned his enthusiasm.

There was a silence. A bee hummed. The two girls watched it from their cold stone bench. Rose was glad of both the cool of the temple and the cold stone bench. She had no idea why she had agreed to accompany May but now she had she was glad that at least she had time to cool down. May was right, ladies should never meet gentlemen in a fluster, whatever that was. The bee had settled on a dandelion, it was creeping

slowly towards the centre of the flower, its striped body round and furry and bristling with purpose.

"Hugo?"

Hugo turned and managed to look into Charles' dancing eyes.

"Hugo, do you not think we should offer the ladies some refreshment? Why, Hugo, they have come all this way and they must be thirsty."

"Yes, indeed. Ladies, would you not like some refreshment?"

Rose looked at May. May did not hesitate.

"We should be very partial to some refreshment, I'm sure." She said this with dignity.

Rose was content to nod her agreement. Then she wondered what she had consented to when she saw that the young men were opening the hampers and taking out bottles of champagne and glasses.

"I'm terribly afraid it might not be as chilled as you would like it."

The echo from the cork exploding from the bottle made Rose jump and May started to laugh.

"I do like a bottle of champagne," she squealed. Then remembering herself, she added, "it's awfully refreshing on a hot day, don't you think?"

Rose held the glass under her nose and the bubbles tickled it. She took a sip. It wasn't very sweet but it didn't taste too bad, better than some things that gentlemen liked to drink, like ale and whisky, stuff that no lady or girl would like, that was for sure.

"To two lovely ladies," Charles lifted his glass.

"Yes indeed," Hugo was finding it easier to enter into the fantasy now that he had a glass of something. "To two lovely ladies and the great honour they have done us by visiting us here."

Hearing the young Viscount making a speech like that startled Rose. She could not tell whether she was becoming affected by the champagne or not, but she thought it was like a fairy tale, seeing the young Viscount toasting her, Rose Buck's, health. It was just like a fairy tale, or a dream, only

dreams usually ended up with you waking up to Grandmother coughing.

"Delicious, I'm sure," May had drunk her first glass down in one. She was so thirsty and it was most refreshing.

Charles moved slowly towards the hamper that contained the wine. He did not want to seem too eager to refill her glass.

"Did you know this temple was built by Hugo's great-great-grandfather?" he asked casually as he poured May another glass. His name was—what was your grandfather's name, Hugo?"

Both girls looked towards Hugo and Charles took the opportunity to top up Rose's glass while their attention was distracted.

"My great-great-grandfather's name was Hugo, like mine, and he built this a little over a hundred years ago. So it's very old."

"Yes, it must be," May nodded wisely, "it's got an old smell."

"Do you think so?" Hugo had great difficulty in controlling his features, "I hadn't noticed that it had any particular smell, I must say."

"I always think old things smell different, don't you, Rose?"

Rose nodded and, perhaps because she had finished what she thought to be only her first glass of champagne, she added, "my grandmother smells old."

This was too much for Hugo. He burst into fits of laughter.

The two girls stared at him, and then May too started to laugh.

"Goodness Rose, you are a laugh, really you are."

Charles watched her. She had very pretty teeth. Unusual.

"Well, ladies, do you not think we should spread out our picnic? You must be quite famished, after your walk," Charles' face was the epitome of concern.

"I am a trifle hungry," May admitted mopping up her tears of laughter. "More than a trifle, now I come to think of it."

"Shall we picnic inside here, in the cool? Wouldn't it be more agreeable?"

"Yes, of course, it would be much more nice," May agreed, "shall I do the honours?"

"If you would."

May noted with approval that his manners were impeccable. No boldness, no cheeking her now they were in company. It was right that it should be so. She was no slut to be treated any old how.

"I'll help you, May," Rose knelt down beside her on the rug that Hugo had spread upon the floor.

They unwrapped the most delicious food that they had ever seen. Perhaps their appetites were sharpened by the walk, all the excitement and the champagne, but it seemed to them that Mrs Amey had done herself proud with the delicacies she had prepared, just for a picnic. Rose remembered the picnics that she and Tim would have at harvest time. Picnics! A hunk of bread and perhaps a piece of bacon, a bottle of water, whatever you could swop or beg off your neighbour. Still, they'd enjoyed them, even though they were nothing like this. No feathery light pastries wrapped around pieces of game cooked in wine. No creamy custards spread over strawberry tarts, no glasses of sparkling wine. She lifted her glass to her mouth again. She loved the bubbles.

There was less to talk about, once they had finished the picnic and Rose had tidied the plates away, and they were left amply satisfied with only the wine to finish up. Less to talk about, because once the girls had finished exclaiming over the provisions, they couldn't think of any subjects that might interest gentlemen and the gentlemen were, it appeared, far too replete to wish to think up new topics of conversation.

They all gazed out on to the view of the lake and noted in their separate ways the heat haze that shimmered above the water. The way that the blue sky didn't appear to have a cloud in it and the fact that the trees were so much in leaf that their outlines were like the outlines of trees in a painting.

"I love doing nothing," May looked round for someone to agree with her. Rose who was sitting with her back against the bench nodded.

"Especially on my day off," she agreed and then thought that she had said something rather foolish because if this was not doing 'something' on her day off, well, then nothing was. She blushed.

Hugo looked at her, and suddenly realised that she was beautiful. She wasn't fashionably beautiful. She didn't have a rounded body and prominent breasts like the other girl, but she was beautiful like a doe. Her dress was too big and obviously borrowed, but where she had pulled it in to try and make it fit her, you could see that she was delicately made and her very slimness only emphasised her large dark eyes and her long thin fingers, that she held so properly in her lap. She was like a child at a party, sent in her elder sister's frock. Now that she no longer wore her uniform he realised that she was probably very young and that if she had been upper class she would most likely still be in the school room.

"Shall we go for a walk?"

Charles appeared to be asking no-one in particular.

"A walk in the woods and gather wild flowers. Shall we go and admire nature, all of us?"

"I don't see why not," May got to her feet and creditably managed not to sway once she was up.

Rose also got to her feet and then, because she felt a little giddy, she stood quite still, hoping to feel less so very soon.

"Will you take my arm, Ma'am?" Charles held out his arm, albeit a very formal one, for May. She took it and smiled. He was treating her just as she had always known she should be treated, like the lady she knew herself to be deep down, when someone would let her.

"Thank you very much."

They walked solemnly out into the sunshine, arm in arm. Hugo and Rose walked behind the other two in silence. Charles continued to make the kind of conversation that would apply to everyone and therefore it didn't seem very necessary to join in too much.

"I always remember these woods in the spring from when I was a boy, full of bluebells and primroses. We used to pick them and give them to our mothers, didn't we, Hugo? And then of course in the winter, with the snow, they are wonderful, aren't they? Magical."

Hugo glanced sideways at Rose walking beside him. She looked even more like a doe in the woodland setting.

"I'll tell you what—" Charles looked back at him, "why don't we go this way and you go that way, and we'll see who can be first back at the Folly. How about that?"

"Yes, let's," May skipped ahead. Her eyes had quite lost their hard look and were sparkling, but not quite as brightly as Charles' were.

"You don't care to be left alone with me, do you?" Hugo looked at his doe, but her eyes were so large they now appeared to take up her whole face, and even her body appeared diminished in contrast to their size.

"I don't mind."

"I think you're frightened, but there's no need to be. I won't harm you, you know."

He was about to say that he wasn't like Charles, when he stopped himself. It was ridiculous to say such a thing because of course he wasn't like Charles. He held out his arm and eventually, because he stood very still, his doe came up to it and put her hand through it.

They walked in silence. The rest of the woods were silent too. As if the birds were watching them, having suspended their song to see what they were doing. The doe picked her way through the bracken and the grass delicately, as if she was afraid that she would suddenly come across a hunter.

"Would you like to rest for a minute?"

"All right; I don't mind."

They sat down in the long grass, Hugo having first spread out his jacket for her to sit on. She looked at it. The stitching on it was so fine, and his initials and crest were embroidered on the lining. She felt him watching her and looked up.

"I was wrong you know, you're not a mouse at all, you're a doe."

She smiled a little at that.

He smiled back at her, and put out his hand. When he looked down at hers he was surprised by its nakedness. It had no rings, no gold or silver, only pink nails neatly trimmed and long fingers that were so unsuitable, it seemed to him, for cleaning out grates and polishing floors. He was

normally slightly repulsed by people outside of his class but he felt no such repulsion towards his doe, only something by turns protective and destructive. He wanted to keep her as she was and yet he wanted to destroy her, so that no-one else could touch her, so that she wouldn't grow up and she wouldn't stop being soft, young and frightened.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," he said, "if things could always be like this? Nobody else, just always summer and just—us."

When he said 'us' it gave him a shock. He didn't think of himself on a level with her, even at this moment when she was sitting doe-like on his jacket, looking up at him. The 'us' gave him a shock and at the same time it made him want to laugh. He was getting more like Charles every minute. Fleetingly he wondered how Charles was getting on and then he turned his attention back to the doe.

'Don't you think that would be wonderful?"

She looked doubtful about that.

"Don't you?"

"Wouldn't you get bored?" she asked shyly.

"No, how could I?"

He wanted to add 'with you and all this', but he thought that might be going too far. And when he looked into her eyes he was certain it would be going too far.

She was laughing at him. It was like a cold shower splashing around his ears.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You. At least, not really. It's just that you don't believe what you're saying. I mean you like holding my hand a little, but you wouldn't like just to stay here all the time holding it. You know you wouldn't."

"Yes, I would," he said lamely and discovered what his friend Charles already knew, that it was a mistake to underestimate even a maid.

"You can't even lie in bed in the morning without reading, you know you can't."

Surprise turned to astonishment. Hugo wanted to order her off his coat and then go home. She was nothing but impertinent.

"You have no business observing what I do in the mornings," he said coldly.

"No, mi'lord."

"And don't call me 'mi'lord', it spoils everything."

"I'm sorry."

"In fact, I think you've spoilt everything already and I wish you wouldn't. We were getting on quite well."

He meant 'I was getting on quite well', because he couldn't help thinking of what Charles was up to and how *he* was getting on. He couldn't help hoping that he wasn't faring better and yet suspecting that he most likely was. He hadn't really wanted Charles to get him into the situation in which he found himself, but now he was in it honour begged him to satisfy his pride. And besides she was rapidly appealing to him more and more.

He had dropped her hand. Now he took hold of it again.

"Don't you feel romantic? Can't you feel the romance of these woods? How much they hum with the miracle of life?"

He couldn't remember where he had got that from but he felt sure he must have read it in some novel belonging to his sister.

"No," said Rose doubtfully, "I can't, I'm afraid."

This time he flung her hand down.

"You are so rude," he cried, getting to his feet and walking away from her. And at that moment he looked to Rose for all the world like Tim when he was in one of his sulks and not at all like Hugo Talbot-Carey, the Viscount Ashby.

Sometimes it is difficult to trace a moment of weakness, because it happens so quickly and very often in such a subtle form that afterwards it is impossible to find out when it could have been. Hugo's petulant backview was Rose's moment of weakness. She did not know it, but it was at that moment that she misjudged him, thinking suddenly that he was no more than Tim—just a boy.

Hugo had not counted on this. He hadn't realised that his weaknesses could be his assets, as Charles would have done. He was inexperienced enough to know that where sophistication so often fails, the boyish sulks, the appeals to the

maternal and the protective will always suddenly conquer. He no longer appealed to Rose as someone rather frightening, someone she knew could harm her, but only as a boy, like Tim was a boy, someone she could coax to eat up his dinner, or tell off for bringing mud into the house.

She put her hand up to rub his cheek and as she did so Hugo caught her to him. He was so cross he could have hit her. Yet he didn't. She pulled away from him and ran. He ran after her. Now she really was a doe. Leaping and laughing through the bracken, darting ahead of him so quickly that at one point he was sure he would lose her. And he panicked at the thought. He could not let her go now. Not for anything.

Eventually when he caught her and felt her cheek against his, it was as soft as it had looked for the past two hours, and her mouth was the same. He knew what he wanted to do and he couldn't see that anything would stop him. Even the fear and then terror that he saw in her eyes only excited him more. Just as when he was hunting or shooting, the very beauty of what ran in front of him only made him more keen to kill it, so that it would stop exciting him with its beauty and at the same time, so that he could prove to himself, over and over, that he was not affected by is death.

Now he understood the light that came into Charles' eyes when he saw a new prey. He had not, before this moment, understood why a man should cajole and coax and eventually win what he could have for only a few sovereigns at any time. Now he understood, and it was a devastating discovery. He knew that the longer she struggled against him the more rewarding his ultimate victory would be. He was convinced that he had to have her, right up until the moment that she was his for the asking and then suddenly, just as her laughter had angered him, her terror contorted him, and he knew that he would have to let her go.

He watched her running off. Not leaping now, but stumbling, catching her borrowed dress on the briars, running and running, as if she was still unconvinced that she was free.

He got up and walked back to the Folly, wondering why

he had stopped at the ultimate victory? Charles would never have stopped. No man he could think of would have stopped. He kicked one of the columns of the temple and then pressed his head against its cool marble. It was so difficult.

CHAPTER TEN

Rose ran and ran. Home to the Lodge. She never stopped to consider what she looked like and how torn May's dress had become.

"Rose!"

Tim looked at her in horror. Rose put her hand over Tim's mouth.

"Is it safe? Can I get upstairs without them seeing?"

Tim nodded. This was an old routine of theirs.

"It's safe all right, Rose, but what's happened to you? What's happened to your dress? Has someone tried to hurt you, Rose?"

Tim put his hand on her arm, and it was more than Rose could stand.

"Yes, they have, Tim," she sobbed, "they tried to hurt me very much, and it was all my fault. I didn't realise. It was terrible, Tim, terrible."

Tim looked at her gravely.

"I've got Big Jim's training whip, shall I go out and whip them for you, Rose?"

"No, Tim, don't worry. I'll be all right. Any minute now I'll be all right."

Later that night Rose crept downstairs with May's dress in a bundle under her arm. She put it on the fire and watched it burn. Nothing like that was ever, ever going to happen to her again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ripple that had been caused by Mr Widgery's spectacular faint was now totally eclipsed by the scandal that sprang up from the Viscount's friend Mr Littleton running off with one of the under-housemaids. For obvious reasons it was a scandal that caused Mr Widgery some satisfaction. It not only replaced the subject of his faint, but it allowed him to re-join the hallowed circle of Mrs Petifor, Mrs Amey and Miss Hodges at tea.

For the past months, aware that they were highly amused by his demonstration of weakness, he had avoided this ritual, in the knowledge that they would merely talk about something else until he was called away and then promptly continue to talk about him. Now he was able to join in their tongue clicking and their endless scandalising. It gave him great satisfaction. No-one likes to be on the outside of anything, least of all the sacred circle of the local gossips.

"I was always, with deference to Her Ladyship, I was always in some doubt as to why Mrs Langston-Smith had been so eager to pass on someone whom she had given it as her opinion was so terribly efficient. Why would not Mrs Langston-Smith have wanted to keep her herself, I asked myself?"

Mr Widgery was warming to his subject so much that he almost forgot himself and dunked his shortbread in his tea.

"I'm sure you said as much to me, Mr Widgery," Mrs Amey nodded.

"I never liked the look in her eye. No, never. She had a way of looking at a person that contained impertinence in it, I didn't like her look at all. I should say so."

Briefly Mr Widgery remembered the look in May's eyes and equally briefly he remembered how shapely she had looked, even in her uniform. The memory caused an inner

tremor. Mr Widgery might, unlike some others, be totally trustworthy as far as the wine cellars were concerned, but every man has his weakness.

"Staff are better acquired from the estate than they ever are from other sources, junior staff, that is," he added quickly in deference to the fact that none of those present had been acquired from the estate.

"You're right Mr Widgery, Rose is one of the best under-housemaids we have ever had and Anne has always been most efficient. You don't get the loyalty, the devotion from other girls, the way you do when their families belong here." It was a novelty for Miss Hodges to agree with Mr Widgery.

There was a pause as everyone trod delicately around the fact that the devotion and loyalty that was given by those whose families came from the estate, was more than due to the fact that their fathers and mothers would give short shrift to those who were dismissed. And short shrift from estate workers was a prospect that no-one relished the thought of.

"It is terrible the way girls give away their virtue nowadays, quite wantonly. It means nothing to them it seems, nothing at all," Mrs Petifor sniffed. Even with her father's fall in fortunes she was glad to say that *she* had never been tempted, not for one minute. And even if she had been a little tempted by a certain young officer in the cavalry, then it had only been for a minute and then, she was glad to say, good sense had prevailed and she had taken up a post, following upon a course in domestic management. She shuddered to think of what would have happened to her had good sense *not* prevailed. She would certainly not have been sitting in the steward's room helping herself to shortbread and madeira cake, goodness me no, things would have been very different.

She re-joined the conversation. Mrs Amey was giving a graphic description of the fate of girls like May.

"And of course once they are abandoned then there is nothing for them but to take to the streets, and we all know what that means."

They all nodded. And again they were silent. Not one of them had lived such a sheltered existence that they hadn't seen what happened to women who were forced to earn their living from the streets. Miss Hodges, who was more tender hearted,

could not help hoping that the inevitable down-hill tilt in fortunes that happened to most women of easy virtue would not reproduce itself with May. She had liked May. Pretty face. Knowing men it was more than likely that her looks had not escaped Mr Widgery's attentions either. Miss Hodges sniffed. She really had no time for the opposite sex at all. They were so devious. Women gossiped perhaps, but men were devious.

"Informing the Countess of May's disappearance was one of the more unpleasant tasks that I have performed in my career. I should say so."

Mr Widgery had indeed found the prospect of informing the Countess unpleasant. He had felt angry, very angry, when he had slipped up the stairs to find that wretched little piece and discovered she had gone. Promises, that's all she had ever made to him. And never once had she fulfilled her promises, the little slut. She'd had him begging for her favours and then once it looked as if she would finally give in to him, once he'd seen an end to his frustrations, she'd gone. And not empty handed either. He'd even given her his mother's watch. The slut.

"Your Ladyship, I have the unpleasant task of telling you that it appears that one of the under-housemaids has disappeared."

The Countess' foot tapped.

"Which under-housemaid, Widgery? Really. I hate to be bothered by these problems. In most households the subject of under-housemaids is not one that you discuss, really it is not. I should never have known about under-housemaids when our last man was here."

This reference to the previous butler made Mr Widgery wince, even though he knew he had been dismissed on account of his addiction to port.

"I should never have brought the matter to Your Ladyship's attention, I do assure you, if it had not occurred to me that a situation of some embarrassment might have occurred, and it is my anxiety to avoid Your Ladyship any embarrassment which forces me to bring up this distasteful subject, mi'lady."

Mr Widgery stopped. The Countess' singular lack of patience usually prevented him from making speeches of the

length that he had just delivered, but he knew that he had her attention today and he knew that he would have her every ear when he had finished.

"It had been noted late last night that the under-housemaid had disappeared—" He forebore to say 'I noted', because it would have been improper to a degree for a butler to have noticed anything about any of the maids' rooms since they were strictly for the maids and no-one else. "This had been noted, but it wasn't until Anne, delegating for the said housemaid, went to take Mr Littleton his tea that it was noted that Mr Littleton's bed had not been slept in and that Mr Littleton had taken his luggage to whatever destination he was heading for. Your Ladyship no doubt noticed that Mr Littleton did not come down for breakfast this morning?"

Her Ladyship had indeed noted that Mr Littleton had not been down for breakfast that morning, but it hadn't seemed to her in any way unusual since young men were apt to get up early and go riding in the summer, and Hugo and Charles' absence had been put down by her as nothing more than being involved in the kind of things that healthy young men involve themselves in.

"Where's Lord Ashby, Widgery?"

The Countess snapped out this question because her concern for her son was as deep as any mother's and she had no desire for Hugo to have been found messing about with housemaids. If it turned out that he had been guilty of this, his father would get to hear of it and then things would go from bad to worse. His father was liable to regard alliances with housemaids as something that should be not only frowned upon, but that would even lead to him having his allowance stopped altogether.

Widgery was glad to see that he was not the only person at Southwold to be affected by the disappearance of the under-housemaid.

"His Lordship is just coming in from riding, mi'lady. Shall I inform His Lordship that Your Ladyship would like to see him?"

"Yes, do so at once."

The relief that the Countess felt that it was not, after all, Hugo who had been guilty of defaulting with one of the

maids was swiftly replaced by annoyance that she had been so led astray by Charles as to think that he was not capable of such a trick. Charles Littleton had always been such a charming little boy, now it appeared he was a too charming big boy. However the memory of his white teeth and dark curling hair made it not unsurprising that he had acted as he had. His grandfather and his father had both been devils. Absolute devils.

Hugo had just finished reading Charles' note when Widgery knocked at the door.

"Hugo—I'm afraid to say that making May while the sun shines proved irresistible—Charles."

Hugo stared at Charles' handwriting. Typical Charles. He had always had to go too far with everything. Now there would be the devil to pay, the very devil. His mother wouldn't care a fiddle about the maid but she would certainly not take kindly to a friend of his having gone off with one of the staff, and thereby causing a scandal in the servants' hall.

There was another knock at the door.

"Yes?"

Hugo screwed up the note and threw it away as Widgery entered.

"Yes, Widgery?"

"Her Ladyship desired me to send for you, Your Lordship. She is in the Music Room."

"Thank you, Widgery."

No-one is too sophisticated to have completely out-grown parental fear. It is too well established from the early days of childhood to be shifted easily. Hugo felt the tremors of a boy who knows that while he is not guilty in every way, he is still in some ways culpable. He had gone riding early, as early as he could, in order to avoid seeing the maid. To think that he could have even been tempted by her puzzled him now, now that he was afraid of what she might have said. He knew that it was not unusual for butlers to hold court martials below stairs. And knowing Widgery, he would have got every detail from her if he had even remotely suspected anything.

"Did you know anything of this ridiculous business, Hugo?"

"No, Mama."

"Is Charles Littleton aware of the trouble he has created by his action? Does he know what a scandal this will have caused in the servants' hall?"

The idea of Charles worrying about causing a scandal in the servants' hall was ludicrous, but Hugo was too much of a gentleman, and a loyal friend, to inform his mother of this. Charles was a devil. He did what he did and if you couldn't accept this about him then there was very little use in talking about him. He tried to distract his mother's attention from this particular line of conversation.

"Had the maid been with you long, Mama?"

"Hugo, do not, I beg of you, be childish. How long the maid has been with us is nothing to do with anything, nothing at all. Maids come and go and that is no concern of mine, only of Widgery and Mrs Petifor but when they start coming and going with your friends it is no longer a matter for just the butler and the housekeeper, it becomes a subject of my concern, I'm sorry to say. Most sorry to say. Charles is most irresponsible, most irresponsible. I shall have no compunction in writing to his parents and informing them of his action."

"His parents are abroad, Mama."

"Then I shall write to them abroad. We can't have young men going around the countryside and disappearing with maids. I hope you had no part in this, Hugo?"

"No, Mama."

Hugo hoped devoutly thta the wretched little maid would say nothing. One word and there would be the devil to pay. The memory of her disappearing through the woods filled him with fear. He hadn't meant to harm her in any way. It had taken him by surprise, this desire for something so innocent.

The Countess looked at her son. She knew that he was very probably lying. It would be unusual for a young man not to know of another young man's intentions, particularly if they were to do with the opposite sex. Still, whether or not Hugo knew of it did not matter greatly, so long as his father did not also get to know of it. If his father found out, things would be very different and he might take it into his head to send Hugo abroad, the way he had been threatening to do

when he heard of his debts. She did not want Hugo to be sent abroad. She would miss him.

"We will not refer to this matter again Hugo, if your father asks you about Charles, you must tell him that he was called back to town—urgently."

"Very well, Mama."

Hugo hurried away from the Music Room. He knew he could not get to see the maid until the following morning without causing suspicions to be aroused. Tomorrow morning seemed a long way off when he knew what she could have already said about him.

In the end it did arrive. He had been awake for some time when, as usual, the door was pushed open very slowly and Rose came in, carrying her cleaning things.

"Good morning, Mouse."

Hugo had decided to play it casual.

"Good morning, mi'lord," Rose bobbed a curtsy and hurried over to the fireplace.

"Is it a fine morning, Mouse?"

"Yes, mi'lord."

Rose knelt down and got out her cleaning materials. Her backview remained as uncommunicative as her monosyllables. Hugo wondered how the devil he was meant to bring up the subject of the picnic and its repercussions. His casual approach did not appear to be very effective. He tried another.

"Will you come here, please?"

"Sorry, mi'lord?"

"Will you come here, please?"

She approached his bedside reluctantly.

Seeing her standing there in the light of his bedside lamp disconcerted Hugo more than her backview. Now she was back in her black dress and little neat white hat she appealed to him even more, her eyes looked, if anything, larger and rounder and he noticed she was trembling. Effortlessly he remembered now exactly why he had acted as he had. She was almost irresistible to him. Almost, because, unlike Charles Hugo prided himself that he had some common sense and did not consider that the gratification of his desires came before absolutely everything.

"Have you spoken to anyone of the picnic?"

"No, mi'lord." Her voice was hardly above a whisper.

"You will not do so, will you?"

"No, mi'lord."

"Good, that's all."

"Thank you, mi'lord.'

She hurried back to the fireplace again and Hugo was suddenly hard put not to laugh. She looked as much like a mouse as on the first day he had seen her.

He didn't know why he should have believed her promise, but he did. Then, as he watched her cleaning out the grate, he knew exactly why he believed her. She was a servant and he wasn't. If she was found out it would be worse for her than it would be for him. He sighed. He was very glad he had been born a Talbot-Carey and not a servant; it might be a little difficult at times, but it was always worse being something else.

He picked up his book and became so engrossed in it that he didn't even notice when she left the room.

If Rose could have, she would have leant against the doors of Hugo's rooms and breathed a sigh of relief, but she was too frightened to allow herself the luxury of doing such a thing. Too frightened and too relieved. Instead she hurried off down the corridor. Her heart was still beating when she arrived in the closet to put away her cleaning materials. She hadn't slept for two days; not since the picnic. She was so frightened that someone would have found out that she had been with May. Not that anyone else knew that it had been the picnic that had started everything off. But Rose knew that if anyone ever did find out she would be dismissed on the spot and even her father's position would be in jeopardy.

Her fear of dismissal and disgracing her family had been stronger than her revulsion at the memory of what had nearly happened to her. Now that she knew she was safe and that the Viscount was as anxious as she was not to say anything about the matter her revulsion flooded back to her. May had been right, men *were* always out to harm you. But if that was so, why had May gone off with Mr Littleton? It didn't make

sense. He would only hurt her, the way Rose had nearly been hurt. The memory of her mother's words came back to her: 'God help us for having been born women, Rose, God help us.'

"Rose! What on earth are you doing in here day dreaming? That's not at all like you," Mrs Petifor had pulled open the closet door. She looked at Rose. "Are you all right Rose? Not feeling ill I hope?"

"No, Mrs Petifor, thank you, I feel perfectly well."

"Good, good, well get on with your work child, we can't afford to day dream in this life, can we?"

"No, Mrs Petifor."

Mrs Petifor watched her hurrying off down the corridor and hoped that the lines under her eyes were not symptomatic of something more serious. Rose was a good girl. She couldn't do with losing two under-housemaids in one week. It would be more than lackadaisical, it would be careless.

As had been expected, the Earl noticed the absence of Charles Littleton that night at dinner. He enquired from his son as to the whereabouts of his friend.

"He was called away urgently," said Hugo.

The Countess looked down the table at her husband. He appeared to be taking this news without much interest. And Hugo, she was glad to see, had had the good sense not to embroider some story. He had not even looked up from helping himself to the soup.

"Everything is urgent when you're young and nothing is when you're old, that is life's tragedy," observed the Earl.

"Marjorie's coming down soon, Hugo, and bringing the children. Richard is to follow later. She tells me in her last letter that James is quite the star of Eaton Place, everyone stops Nanny when she pushes him out in his perambulator."

The Earl was amused by his wife's sudden switch in conversation. He liked to notice women's ploys because they always prided themselves on being so subtle.

It didn't really matter to him in the least if his son's friend went off with some chambermaid. So long as it wasn't Hugo making an ass of himself, then he saw very little cause to be

troubled. Nevertheless he liked to know what was going on in his own house; and he was grateful to Widgery for keeping him informed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rose missed May and she often wondered what she was doing. She remembered how often May had said that she was going to make sure that *she* would do better than others. She remembered how much she had hated Mr Widgery; and she wondered why she had chosen to run off with Mr Littleton.

All these things puzzled her, because she had looked up to May so much and because she had thought of May as having sense and not being the kind of girl to get herself into trouble. But she knew too that May had brains and, when she had finished puzzling over her, she came to the conclusion that she would not have done anything foolish and very soon no doubt they would all get to hear of May getting married and becoming 'Mrs Littleton'; and she would come down to stay at Southwold and lord it over all of them.

It happened. Rose knew it happened because she had read books where things like that happened and only the other day she had read one out to Mary which ended like that. Mary couldn't read and Rose had taken to reading her stories on her day off, knowing how much her stepmother enjoyed it. If she had had the time she would have liked to have taught her her letters, but she never seemed to have enough time for such things on her day off, what with Tim and Tatty to play with and going down the village to see Margaret, and young John growing up so much now you could hold conversations with him.

The incident of the picnic faded from her mind the way that most incidents, however distasteful, do fade from your mind when you are not yet sixteen. A result of it had been that she had thrown herself back once more into the life of the Lodge, and realised how much it meant to her, even though she shared very little of it now. She was no longer its mistress as she had been before her father's marriage; she was

its grateful elder daughter. However late she crept back to it after work, she could still hug its warm kitchen and its bare wooden stairs, and wrap it around her like an old but friendly blanket.

The realisation of what had nearly happened to her made her cling to the security of her roots and she no longer despised her background as she had done earlier, wishing that it was better, or that she had been born differently. Rather she over-appreciated it, and if her family became once more dependent on her, if only for her loving ways, she became dependent on them in a way she had not been before.

It was for this reason that Mrs Petifor's words came as such a shock to her.

"Rose, I'm glad to say that you have been deeply honoured. I have recommended to the Countess that you should accompany Lady Marjorie back to town after her visit and that you should take up residence in Lady Marjorie's house at Eaton Place. Now what have you to say about that, Rose?"

For a full minute Rose had very little to say about it. Naturally, just the way Mrs Petifor had put it made her feel grateful. She was definitely grateful, there was no doubt about that. And then of course she was proud. It was wonderful to have been chosen to work for Lady Marjorie, who was so beautiful, and everyone below-stairs admired her so much. But then she realised that it would mean leaving Southwold and she wanted to pass the honour up.

"Well, Rose, have you nothing to say about this? You realise what an honour this is? I hope you do."

"Yes, of course, Mrs Petifor. I'm most honoured. Thank you very much," Rose bobbed a curtsy.

"I should think so too, child. You are still very young I know, but to be chosen to go to London means, as I am sure you realise, that the Countess and I consider that your head will not be turned like some we know." Rose knew that she was referring to May, "and that you can be trusted to carry out your duties and stick to the straight and narrow in the same way as you have done here. Now run along girl, Mr Widgery is about to brief the staff about Lady Marjorie's visit."

Rose listened to Mr Widgery's instructions to his staff in

bewilderment. Nothing meant very much to her in relation to what Mrs Petifor had just said.

She was to go to London! Just like that. She was going to work for Lady Marjorie. It didn't seem possible that in a matter of a few minutes her whole future could be changed. It took only Mrs Petifor and a few words from the Countess, and next month she would be on the coach to London. As usual there was no-one awake when she crept into the Lodge that night. She wished that someone had been up so that she could tell them what had been decided. She wanted to be reassured. She knew it was an honour, but it was an honour that brought a lump to her throat every time she thought about it.

"Rose, that is an honour," Mary's mouth fell open.

"Your wages will be increased, won't they?"

Her father's mind flew in the direction that most men's do, when they have knowledge that their children are about to have good fortune.

"Yes, I'm to get a shilling more."

"I thought that's how it would be," her father nodded happily at Mary. If Rose's wages went up, her monthly contribution to the family expenses would also go up, he was happy to say.

"We shall miss you, Rose," said Mary, "but it's wonderful for you, isn't it?"

Rose nodded. She didn't feel it was wonderful at all.

Tim looked at her from across the kitchen.

"Tatty will miss you," he said, and Rose knew he was speaking for both of them.

"Of course it's not until next month," she explained to Mary, trying to take the relief out of her voice. "Not until next month," she said again and wondered for the twentieth time what 'London' would be like, and what it would be like to go to sleep in a strange room, and how it would feel never to see her family, even on her day off. It would take so much money to buy a ticket and come home to Southwold. She doubted whether she would ever have that much.

Of course there would be visits. She knew there would be visits because Lady Marjorie would come down to Southwold and of course she could write to Tim, and now his lessons

were coming along so well, he could write to her. And most likely one day he would come up to London and learn to be someone's coachman. Most likely.

"I think I'll just take a walk down the village to see Margaret." She got up and picked up her shawl. "I won't be long."

Her father watched her go.

"I knew Rose would go far, Mary," he said proudly. "The way she used to manage here was something wonderful."

Rose walked down the main street.

It was the time of evening in summer when an English village would appear to be one of the most pleasant places that any man could think of. When the light has softened into evening and the occasional lamp has been lit in an upper window. Brick and thatch look as mellow as the worn cobbles of the inn yard. A dog sits in the main street, every now and then getting up to inspect a passer-by, and then returning lazily to his place, aware that at this time no strange scents pass him.

The homeliness of Southwold had never struck Rose so forcibly as it did now. She wanted to stay where she had been born, in and around the village where her mother had come as a stranger. She could hear the voices of her father's friends in the inn, laughing and talking. And ahead of her she could see Margaret's cottage. The door was open, and she could hear Margaret scolding one of the children, and the baby, one of the many babies, crying. She turned back. Margaret's kindness would only make her sadder. She headed instead for the churchyard.

Someone stepped out of the twilight into her path.

"Why, Albert! Lawks!" She had never stopped using May's expressions even now she was gone, "I didn't see you!"

She stopped.

"I could have fainted from fright, really I could. Albert, you shouldn't do that, really you shouldn't. What are you doing here anyway?"

Albert swung from foot to foot.

"I was reading, Rose. It's always so quiet here, I come here to have a read and think. Father doesn't like to see me thinking and it gets under his skin to see anyone reading. He's that

type of person, the type of person that can't stand to see someone reading."

"I'll have to sit down after that, I've never had such a fright," Rose sat down on one of the older gravestones. It didn't seem quite proper to sit down on a newer one. She patted the stone. "Sit down, Albert."

She looked at him sitting beside her. Poor Albert, he was taller and skinnier than ever, if that were possible. The last time she had seen him he'd been at Lady Marjorie's—no at her father's wedding. Heavens, her mind was so muddled tonight, she didn't know whether she was coming or going.

"How's Mrs Dickinson?" she asked after a few minutes, during which time Albert, who was never at his best when conversation was demanded of him, breathed deeply.

"She's in very good health," replied Albert.

Rose stared at him.

"You don't normally talk like that Albert."

"No, I don't Rose, I'm practising. I've been reading more and more books since we last met, and that's how folk talk in books."

"Not all books, Albert," Rose reproved him. "Otherwise they would all read the same."

"Yes, you're right, Rose, not all books, but most of the ones I've been reading lately seem to have folk talking like that."

"Yes, well, perhaps they've all been by the same person," said Rose kindly.

"No they haven't, Rose."

There seemed very little point in pursuing this line of conversation, so Rose changed the subject.

"Have you seen Eddie lately, Albert?"

"Yes, Rose."

Albert was aware that every girl in the village had an eye to Eddie. Eddie was what Albert would have liked to have been.

"He's going to join the Yeomanry."

"That's nothing, I'm going to London."

For the first time Rose realised that she was going to seem quite someone to everyone at Southwold. It wasn't everyone that went to London, in fact very few of the village had ever been further than the neighbouring town.

"I'm going to work for Lady Marjorie Bellamy at Eaton Place."

"Are you, Rose?"

"Yes, and I'm going to be her first under-housemaid."

Rose had no idea what under-housemaid she was going to be, first, second, or ninth, but she felt instinctively that if she was going to talk about her new position it had better sound not just important, but very important. Since Albert made no reply to the information she had just given him she added inconsequentially, "anyway Eddie's always saying he's going to join the Yeomanry, and he never has done yet."

Eddie had been taking an interest in Daisy lately, much to the scandal of the village, who considered that a young man taking out an older girl, and everyone knew that Daisy was no chicken, wasn't right. Rose thought much as the rest of the village.

"I think he will though, Rose, Eddie's determined to leave Southwold some time. He's not interested in farm work, he says he never had been.'

"He's not interested in anything, that Eddie. Never was."

"I'm not interested in farm work either," Albert looked at Rose, fully expecting her to be scandalised.

"No, I know, Albert, but then you're a book lover. Mrs Dickinson said that about you. She's going to train you to be a good teacher too, Albert, so I wouldn't worry about farm work, not if I was you."

"My father—"

"Your father, don't think about him, silly old goat. One day he'll be an old man, and he won't be able to thrash you any more, just remember that, Albert. When we get older, parents become our children, Mrs Dickinson said that."

Rose said this to encourage Albert. Poor Albert, who was so thin and so nervous, and yet he could add up quicker and knew more words than anyone else in the village. She saw her words brought a look of encouragement to his face. She wished he'd stop wanting to be like Eddie. Eddie was as broad and handsome as Albert was the reverse, but there was something gentle about Albert that no-one except Mrs Dickinson seemed to appreciate. He might not be the ladies' man that Eddie was, and there was no denying, Rose thought ruefully,

that Eddie was uncommonly attractive and very much a man, but nevertheless Albert was not as silly as everyone liked to paint him.

"I expect I'll see you before I go to London, Albert," she extended her hand to him in the way that she had noted that gentry did, "but if I don't, I hope you will call at Eaton Place sometime."

Albert looked so crestfallen by this idea and so hurt by her suddenly grand manner that she quickly stopped pretending to be grand and said, "you will come and see me if you ever come to London, won't you, Albert?"

He pumped her hand up and down, "of course I will, Rose. I'll—we'll miss you, everyone will miss you. You're a nice girl, Rose."

Rose felt herself blushing.

"Well, I might see you again before I go, but it depends—on my days off. Father likes me home."

"Goodbye, Rose."

"Goodbye, Albert."

She walked off down the village. She could see the smoke curling up from the Lodge and she could almost smell the stew that Mary was cooking before she reached the door. One more day off and then she would be somewhere else.

She still couldn't believe it.

Like the days of a holiday, the weeks leading up to departture appear to move quicker than at any other time. The extra burden on the staff from having Lady Marjorie, Nanny, and the two children staying at the house might have had something to do with the fact that it appeared to Rose as if the days were only minutes. On the other hand it might also have been very much to do with her reluctance to leave Southwold, and also Mrs Petifor's determined efforts to make her into an even more efficient product of Southwold, than she already was.

"I hope you won't think that Lady Marjorie's dusters can be skimped in this way, Rose?"

"No, Mrs Petifor."

"I hope you won't think that Eaton Place has floors whose corners are better for being unpolished?"

"No, Mrs Petifor."

"In London, Rose, people like their staff to keep their uniforms as neat and as tidy as a new pin. I know you can't help the fact that you are slight, but slightness is not an excuse for untidiness, please do up your apron tighter."

"Yes, Mrs Petifor."

In Rose's imagination Eaton Place grew to the proportions of a palace, twice the size of Southwold. She saw herself polishing floors that would be a mile or two wide and at night in her dreams she continually washed and wrung out her dusters and mops, over and over again. She knew that if she got dismissed from Eaton Place all would be lost. To be returned to Southwold would mean that she would never ever again be able to hold up her head in the village.

"Now, Rose, I know you are aware of the great honour that Lady Marjorie and the Countess have done to you in allowing you to go to London and broaden your career, not to mention your horizons. Are you going to do your best to justify this honour? Are you going to prove yourself worthy, Rose?"

"Yes, Mrs Petifor, I hope so, Mrs Petifor."

"So do I, Rose, so do I. I beg you remember the training you have received here at Southwold. Bear in mind that everyone will be watching you. You will be representing Southwold at Eaton Place, your standards will be taken to be Southwold standards and if you do not uphold those standards to the best of your ability your weaknesses will be put down to Southwold's weaknesses, and we can't have that, can we, Rose?"

Rose had very little idea of what Mrs Petifor was saying. All she was aware of was that Mrs Petifor was taking up the last few precious hours she had to spend with her family, before her departure the following morning.

"Can we, Rose?" Mrs Petifor looked at her searchingly and repeated her question.

"No, Mrs Petifor."

"Your mother worked here, and now *you* have had your training here, and I know you will always remember what Southwold has done, and is doing for your family. As my own

personal gift to you Rose, because I know you have tried hard, I am giving you this picture. You will see that it is an illustration from the Bible. I suggest you put it in your Bible and take its story to your heart. Ruth was a good woman, Rose, and I hope you will grow up into a good woman, too."

"Yes, Mrs Petifor, thank you, Mrs Petifor."

Rose took the picture, and later that afternoon, she put it carefully inside her Bible and packed it with her good dress and bonnet that she'd bought for her father's wedding, and her three pairs of black uniform stockings, two vests, two nightdresses, two caps (white), one pair of extra shoes, two aprons and three or four other items of under-garments.

Supper was a sad affair since she did not feel like talking and nor did anyone else it seemed. Mary had cooked something especially good, and her fruit tarts and scalded cream were as good as anything they ate at the big house, but still they did little to cheer anyone or make the evening convivial.

Tim and young John stared at her as if they were neither of them ever going to see her again and Father didn't even look in her direction.

"I expect I'll be down for Christmas," Rose remarked to nobody in particular.

"Lottie's never come back, Rose," Tim tried to look as matter of fact about this as he could, and failed dismally. "She went off to service and never came back."

"That was because Lottie was dismissed, Tim, that's different, she had to go into service with other people. I shall be in service with Lady Marjorie, and when she comes back to Southwold she'll bring me too, the way she brings Nanny. Nanny told me that herself at tea yesterday."

Nanny had been kind at tea. She'd said that any daughter of Lucy Buck's would be welcome at Eaton Place and that had given Rose confidence. At least she'd know Nanny when she got to London, if only from serving her tea and madeira cake.

"Your grandmother wants you to go up to her, Rose," Mary had brought Grandmother's tray down.

Rose looked at the old woman lying in the bed. She'd never

liked her grandmother and now she was old and in bed she found it even harder to like her. Grandmother hadn't liked Mother, and she'd been glad when she died. And now poor Mary had given her no more grandchildren she bit into her all day long, banging on the floor with her stick just as soon as Mary got downstairs, or calling to her continually if she was in the garden.

"Is that you, Rose?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

She could still feel the clout that her grandmother had given her round the ears.

"So you're going to London, child?"

Rose twitched with impatience. Everyone was 'child' to her grandmother, except Mrs Burrows or one of the old ladies in the village, even Mary was 'child'.

"Yes, Grandmother, I'm going to London."

"Going to learn new fangled ways, and I'll be lying in the graveyard e'en now before you're back, no doubt."

Rose said nothing. She could see very little difference between lying in the graveyard and lying in bed all day. Except it would be more difficult for Grandmother to bang on the floor with her stick from the graveyard, although knowing her, she'd soon find a way, no doubt.

"You're a good girl, Rose, a good girl, even though I say it for myself. Folk would go a long way before they found a better daughter than you've been to your father, I'll say that for you, child."

This was surprising. Rose looked distrustingly at the old lady and waited for the sting to come after.

"I want you to have this. I won't need it any more."

Rose looked at her in astonishment.

"But Grandmother, that's your shawl."

"Of course it's my shawl," said Grandmother testily, "I may be going blind but I can tell a shawl from a dish mop. I want you to have it. It's a town shawl, Rose, a shawl for London. It came from London and it should be worn in London. You'll be the belle of the place Rose in that shawl, so you'll be. You'll let them town folk know that Bucks are Bucks, and not folk to be looked down upon. Put it round

you, I like to see you, then I can remember when you're gone and hold it in my mind."

Rose turned to and fro in front of her grandmother.

They both grinned at each other.

It was a beautiful shawl.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The coach swayed from side to side and Rose stared very hard at Nanny's bonnet, to take her mind off the picture of her family standing by the gate and waving to her over and over again. Tim, and young John standing in front, and Father and Mary behind. They had kissed her, and she had kissed them, even Tim, who hated being kissed. And they had all pretended that they didn't want to cry. All, that is, except young John, who had wet the collar of her cloak with his howls and had to be given a piece of barley sugar to suck.

She had been allowed to say goodbye to her family, by kind permission from Lady Marjorie. And then the coach bearing Nanny and the children had rolled to a halt in front of the Lodge and Rose had climbed in and sat down, without looking back, until they turned out of the gate, and then she had waved from the window, the lump in her throat growing sorer by the minute. She knew she must not cry and that she must control herself, not just in front of Nanny, but in front of Lady Marjorie's young children, James and Elizabeth.

They stared at her, the two children. And she in her turn stared at Nanny's bonnet, and it was for this reason perhaps that no-one said very much for the first couple of miles. Eventually Nanny said, "James, put your legs out straight. I do not want you sitting on your feet and dirtying the seat of your trousers."

James stuck one immaculate foot out in front of him, and then as Nanny stared at him, he reluctantly stuck out the other one. Elizabeth sucked her thumb.

"There we are," Nanny twitched Elizabeth's frock beneath her cloak. "That's a fine wee frock Her Ladyship gave you, Miss Elizabeth, isn't it?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"You can take your thumb out of your mouth, Miss Elizabeth. Thumbs don't improve our appearances, do they, Rose?"

"No ma'am, they don't."

"Come on now, Rose, call me Nanny Southwold the way everyone does. Nanny Southwold I've been since Lady Marjorie was a child, and I've no reason to see my changing it now."

"Thank you ma'am," Rose's eyes dropped from the bow on Nanny's bonnet to Nanny's face which was regarding her with some amusement.

"I expect you're feeling sad, and a little lonely. You've never left home before have you, Rose? I remember when I left to come to Southwold. As far as the villagers went they might as well have been speaking French, for all I could understand."

Nanny laughed a little at the memory, and stared out of the window.

"Yes, they might as well have been speaking French, really they might."

Rose wondered vaguely if Londoners spoke very differently too. Certainly May's accent had been different, as different as Nanny's was from Mrs Petifor's, but she could still understand what she said. She hoped to goodness she would understand what everyone in London said. She twisted her handkerchief between her fingers. How terrible it would be if they didn't understand her. Perhaps they would make fun of her, a country girl who didn't speak the same as them? If only they didn't, everything would be all right.

"You mustn't worry too much, girl. Life in London's not very different from life anywhere else, I'm happy to say. People are people you know, it's only the way they go on that makes them different, together with where and how they're born," she added after a pause.

Rose couldn't understand this. She could see that people were people all right, but she'd been unable to follow the rest of Nanny's thinking. She sighed. There was no doubt at all but that life in London was going to prove complicated if it turned out that everyone there reasoned as Nanny did.

Nanny continued to talk.

Rose continued to listen.

It was dark when they arrived at Eaton Place. Rose alighted ahead of Nanny and helped to lift the children down. They were both half asleep and she therefore held Miss Elizabeth against her, to prevent her from falling over, while the coachman rang the bell and helped Nanny to alight from the coach, a little stiffly, but with all her speech powers still intact.

"Carefully now, Master James, there's no point in waking yourself up when you're about to have to go to sleep again. Now, Rose, make sure that Miss Elizabeth doesn't slip on the steps, she's a terrible one for slipping over, not having yet learnt how to walk very long. Now Miss Elizabeth, don't start crying, that won't help, will it, Hudson? No, of course not. Let Hudson carry you, Miss Elizabeth. Yes, yes Master James, you can give the horses some sugar, if you'll just come straight in afterwards. Goodness gracious, Hudson, it seems as if we've been away a year and not a month."

Rose stood awkwardly in the hall. In the bustle of everyone concerning themselves with the children she had been ignored, she was glad to say, and now she was still being ignored, and yet she knew that it was not proper that she should stand in the hall where gentry came in and out. Taking her own advice she slipped through what was obviously the staff door, and descended the stairs to the basement.

The kitchen and staff room were deserted, but determined to do the right thing, she put her suitcase neatly down by a chair, and herself sat down on it and waited.

It was possibly the fact that she had not slept very well, owing to it being her last night at home, or perhaps because she had been on a long journey and travelling in trains and coaches was tiring when you weren't used to it, but she could barely prevent herself from falling asleep. She kept straightening her back. The clock ticking helped to keep her awake, but it was a tough fight to stop her eyes from closing.

"Goodness gracious, what are you doing here?"

The butler whom Nanny Southwold had called 'Hudson' turned quickly when he saw her.

"You should be in your bed, girl."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, *Mr Hudson.*"

"Do you not know where your bed is? No, of course you don't. Well, follow me, girl, and mind you're quiet about it. The rest of the staff are asleep, and have been so for the past hour."

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

Rose followed him up the stairs, until eventually he stopped outside what was obviously an attic bedroom.

"This is your room. You're sharing with another under-housemaid by the name of Agnes. Now I'll wish you good-night, and see you in the morning for your instructions," he whispered.

Rose pushed open the door, and peered through the room. Her suitcase felt so heavy now it was all she could do to lift it into the room. She set it down as quietly as she could. There was a lamp still burning on the empty side of the bed, and on the other side she could see there was a young girl fast asleep. She undressed, as quietly as possible, and crawled into bed beside her. Happily, she was too tired to remember how lonely she felt. She blew out the lamp and fell asleep almost immediately.

She awoke not just to a strange room, but to a strange face staring into hers.

"You must be the new one, then?" said the face that was still half asleep as well. "We was expecting you earlier last night, but you didn't come. What happened to you?"

"We were delayed?"

"What?"

"We were delayed," Rose raised her voice a little.

The little person bending so inquisitively over her straightened up.

"You were delayed, was you? Well, well, we mustn't be delayed now you know, or Mrs Bridges will have our guts for garters." Her accent was practically the same as May's.

The two girls started to dress.

"Mrs Bridges is our cook, and if we're late she lets us have it. Beatrice is our house-parlourmaid, and James is the coachman. Then there's the two footmen, cheeky devils both, and you and I, and Patty the scully, and Nanny, and of course, Miss Roberts, Lady Marjorie's maid. By the way, what's your name?"

"Rose."

"Well, Rose, I'm Aggie, and if you stick close to me you'll be alright. Come on. Hats straight, shoes polished, aprons tied and off we go."

She gave Rose a cheeky grin, and Rose followed her downstairs.

"Good morning, girls," Mr Hudson took out his watch and inspected it. "On time by half a minute, I'm glad to say. We try and keep naval time here, Rose. Naval time, one minute before time. This is Mrs Bridges."

"You're the new one, eh?" Mrs Bridges looked up from her tea, "well work hard and keep your nose clean, and things will be all right for you."

Mr Hudson sniffed. He didn't really like Mrs Bridges using that expression. It was a bad example to the junior staff, but unfortunately a cook of Mrs Bridges' calibre was not easy to come by, so he had to be prepared to take the rough with the smooth. Lady Marjorie had been some time finding Mrs Bridges. They had been through a succession of women with cooking that would have given even the Prince of Wales indigestion, before she found the right one. Mr Hudson was well aware that a young wife does not like to see her husband pushing his plate away from him after a hard day at the House.

Mr Hudson called "Beatrice!" and a young girl with blonde hair presented herself. "Rose will be in your charge from now on, Beatrice. Since she has received her training at Southwold I feel sure that she will need very little supervision. It will be more a question of her acquainting herself with the geography of the house and getting used to a different routine, and the later hours we keep in town. Now get on with it, girls."

During those first few weeks Rose felt that Mrs Petifor's words followed her everywhere around Eaton Place. She was convinced she was being watched closely. She imagined the other girls and the other staff were all watching her to see if she was going to let Southwold down. She worried so much about this that she hardly ever spoke unless spoken to, and also because she was too busy trying to pick up a London accent. She felt she could not open her mouth until she had learnt to

talk as everyone else besides Mr Hudson and Nanny seemed to.

Every night she listened carefully to Agnes as she chattered away after the long day. Agnes said 'lawks' the same as May, although not quite so often. She also said 'blimey' which Rose thought might not be very nice, and she said several other things which Rose also guessed couldn't be anything very nice either.

She found the work almost light after Southwold, and was astonished that everything was so much smaller. The floors, the furniture, everything. She had imagined London to be larger and grander, and instead it was smaller and more cramped. After the first month she wrote a letter to her family. It took her a considerable time. Agnes watched her with some envy.

"What are you writing, then? I mean, what can you think of to write about? You haven't been 'ere very long, have you? I mean what can you write about when you haven't been 'ere very long?"

Rose said nothing. Her writing materials had cost her so much of her money, she was determined to use them carefully and that her first letter home would be the model of all that Mrs Dickinson had taught her.

She wrote—

"Dear Father, and Grandmother, and Tim, and Young John. I am very well. I hope you are very well. I arrived safely. Please send my love to Tatty, and to everyone, and to Margaret, and to Albert, love Rose."

She didn't know why she had suddenly included Albert.

Agnes peered at the letter when Rose had finished.

"That looks really quite good, Rose. You must be a good writer. Could you teach me?"

Rose nodded.

Agnes stared.

"Sometimes I get the feeling you're blooming well dumb, or do you think you're a cut above us lot, Miss Snotty from Southwold?"

Rose blushed. Like everyone who hopes they're being unobtrusive, she had been convinced that no-one had noticed

that she hardly spoke. To her consternation Agnes started to cry.

"I suppose you think you're too high and mighty for the likes of us cockney girls? I suppose you don't even like sharing a bed with me, and being in the same room. Well, it's not my fault I'm like what I am."

Rose felt so ashamed she hardly knew how to comfort Agnes. She tried to explain how she felt, and failed. Agnes went on crying.

"Please, Aggie, Beatrice will come in and you'll get me into trouble," Rose begged.

"I don't care, you hurt my blooming feelings with your snooty ways."

"I won't any more I promise, please Aggie, please stop."

The little face looked up at her.

"All right, I'll stop if you promises to talk to me."

"I promise."

"Cross yer 'art?"

"Cross me heart Agnes, really."

"Hurrah!"

Agnes flung her arms around Rose's neck.

"I've been wanting a friend of me own ever since I came 'ere, and the last girl went and got into trouble before I had time to know 'er. Now I've got you, and now you'll be my friend, won't you, Rose?"

"I'd love to be your friend, Aggie, really I would."

"If we have our days off together I'll show you some sights, Rose. Bet you've never been on a tram."

The following day Mr Hudson noted with satisfaction that the new girl from Southwold was looking less peeky. He didn't like his staff looking peeky, any more than any other man. He liked a fit and healthy staff, God fearing and healthy.

"Rose?"

"Yes, Mr Hudson?"

"You have settled in now, haven't you, Rose?"

He made this a statement of fact, since he didn't like to encourage the idea that it was not possible for anyone not to have settled in at Eaton Place.

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

"Good, good. Well, let's get on with the day, then."

"Agnes?"

"Yes, Hudson?"

"Run and take this to Miss Roberts on the first floor."

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

Mr Hudson watched her running nimbly upstairs. She was a cheeky young thing was Agnes, but full of spirits. It wouldn't be surprising to him if she didn't turn out very well in the end, providing she kept her nose clean, that is. He really must remember not to use that expression of Mrs Bridges.

Mr Hudson looked at his watch. Soon Lady Marjorie would be ringing for him.

After that time seemed to slip by.

Rose came to be able to accept her life at Eaton Place. She missed the country and her family a little less day by day, and although she found it difficult to sleep, and strange to wake up and not hear the sounds of the country, Aggie's ability to fall asleep almost as soon as she had climbed into bed, and her cheery way of waking up as if she had only been asleep for a second, was as infectious as her grandiose plans for spending a day off together and going to see some sights, and maybe even having a cake in a tea shop.

"Sometimes, when Lady Marjorie's away for a house party, Mr Hudson has been known to give some of the staff a day off together. So there's more of us on when she comes back. Least I think that's what he does it for," Aggie added doubtfully.

Rose knew that it was most probably a figment of Aggie's colourful imagination in just the same way as she had told Rose that she was sure that Mr Hudson had a soft spot for Mrs Bridges, and that Nanny had a soft spot for Mr Hudson.

Aggie was not happy unless she was inventing stories, and the stories she invented were as romantic as her very favourite story, which was about her and Rose walking along the street, and two gentlemen seeing them and falling for them, and whisking them away to a castle in the country, which was 'shrouded in mist.'

Rose sighed. She didn't like to tell Aggie about what really happened with gentlemen in the country, so she said, "Every-

thing's always 'shrouded in mist' in your stories, Aggie."

"I know, Rose, because that's the future you see. The future is always shrouded in mist, so that's why there's a lot of it in my stories. There's an awful lot of future, everything's future really, isn't it? I mean, your *life's* more future than anything; when you're young that is. And then it's more past than anything."

"I think we'd better go to sleep now, Aggie."

Rose was getting in a muddle over Aggie's philosophy.

"Yes, Rose."

Rose listened to Aggie sleeping. It would be wonderful to be able to spend her next day off with someone else. On her last, it had been all she could do to summon up the courage to go into a shop and buy herself some writing materials and then she had hurried back to Eaton Place, and only too thankfully joined Nanny and Mrs Bridges in having a cup of tea. Aggie was a cockney, and she would be able to show Rose the sights of London, there was no doubt about that.

" 'Ere, Rose, guess what? You're right, it's blooming well happened, we're going to get the day off together, and Mr Hudson just said as much! I 'eard him tell Mrs Bridges. Isn't it marvellous?"

Aggie skipped up and down excitedly in front of Rose.

"Aggie, really! You'll get us into trouble."

"We're going to have the day off, the day off," Aggie continued to skip, and Mr Hudson heard her.

"Agnes! Come here at once."

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

Looking into Aggie's perky little face, even Mr Hudson found it difficult to tell her off the way he knew he should do. He was not a man who possessed a huge sense of humour, but nevertheless he couldn't help wanting to laugh when he saw how crestfallen Aggie looked. She looked like a sorrowful sparrow who'd just had its crumb snatched away.

"Agnes, you are not to make displays of this kind."

"No, Mr Hudson."

"Upstairs quick, girl, Beattrice needs a hand in the dining room."

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

Mr Hudson looked at Rose who was still dutifully laying the staff table.

"I can't have disorder, Rose."

"No, Mr Hudson."

"You must not let Aggie's—Agnes'—high spirits run away with her, Rose. She's very young and inexperienced, she doesn't yet know what is what."

"Little devil," said Mrs Bridges affectionately as she put down some caper sauce on the table.

"Quite," said Mr Hudson, his Scots puritanism struggling with the affection he too felt for Aggie, "but little devils grow into big ones, Mrs Bridges, as I'm sure you realise yourself."

"I do, Mr Hudson, but no-one could imagine Aggie having any harm to her, she's too,—too, well, I'm hanged if I know how to put it."

"And hanged she'll be if I have any more displays from her," said Mr Hudson grimly, but no-one believed him. You could as well be cross with Aggie as with a puppy or a kitten. Even Lady Marjorie held her in affection.

"Do you know, Richard, Robert says Aggie remembers everybody's birthdays? Isn't that strange? She can't write, but she buys them a card out of her savings. She can't have anything left for her days off."

Richard Bellamy looked across at his young wife. She was looking particularly beautiful tonight. He hadn't heard a word she had just said, but he realised that he should put in a word about whatever she had just mentioned, so he said 'really?' which seemed to satisfy her, and then he returned to contemplating how beautiful she was. He couldn't quite make up his mind as to whether he preferred her in that stunning blue, or the grey and white she had worn for Anna's ball the other night. It was a problem he was happy to toy with for the rest of the evening.

"Richard, you haven't heard a word I've just said."

Lady Marjorie, like all women, was quite happy not to be listened to when she saw that particular look on her husband's face.

"Where shall we go first, Aggie?"

Although Rose was in the habit of feeling superior to

Aggie, on account of what she considered to be her greater experience of life—she now felt very much her junior. Aggie seemed to know every street and every paving stone in London, and whereas Rose felt quite lost as soon as she left Eaton Place, Aggie headed in one direction or another with the sureness of someone who knows the city she's been born in like the back of her hand.

"I'll take you up the 'dilly first, Rose, and then we'll go down Regent Street, and then—listen, you 'aven't seen nothing to what I'm going to show yer today."

Aggie executed another of her famous skips.

"You may have been brought up within a stone's throw of Lady Marjorie's stately 'ome, Rose, but I'm a blooming cockney. Born within the sound of Bow Bells that means. And I'll show you things, I really will."

Perhaps because Rose had an inbuilt reverence for what she had once called the 'gentry', now as she wandered about London in Aggie's wake, she liked the sight of the fashionable ladies and gentlemen more than anything. She liked to see the high stepping horses, and the coaches and pairs, and the liveries of the coachmen.

At one point they stopped outside a restaurant, and Rose saw a lady of such magnificence that she gasped.

"She looks more beautiful than a peacock, Aggie," she whispered as the lady stepped by her, followed by the rest of the party.

"With her looks, it won't be long before the Prince of Blooming Wales takes a shine to her," said Aggie knowledgeably.

Rose said nothing. She was secretly impressed by Aggie's suddenly sophisticated turn of conversation. She thought of May as she so often did, and wondered if she too at this moment was stepping into some wonderful sophisticated restaurant, all perfumed and powdered, with a party of grand people following her? May had been sure to get on. With May's looks all she could have done was go up in the world, Rose was sure of that.

They wandered on.

"Where's your family, Aggie?"

Aggie shrugged her shoulders.

"Over there," she said waving her hand in the opposite direction, in a somewhat vague manner. "They're over there, Rose. All tucked up with some gin bottles no doubt, and me mother bent over her buttonholes at a halfpenny a time. I was lucky. One of them do-gooding ladies took me in and that's how come I got into service, but the rest of them's gone down hill as fast as the gin slips down their throats. Still, they're happy, I suppose. They've never been ones to grumble much, my lot haven't, and as for me mother she says I was the youngest and the least wanted, but I was born with a blooming silver spoon in me mouth, and when I look at where I am today, Rose, I reckon she was blooming right," Aggie grinned. "Listen, Rose, I'm going to have a cake the size of me hat when we get to that tea shop, and a cup of tea twice the size of me hat, and then I reckon that'll be me lot for the next few hundred years, because I won't have a penny of me wages left."

Rose looked at a carriage dashing past them, and the two girls instinctively stepped away to avoid the mud splashing the hems of their skirts. Aggie squealed with delight.

"Rose!"

Rose looked up from shaking the mud from her hem. It was not Aggie who'd just addressed her. Aggie was already skipping ahead again.

"Rose!"

Rose looked round.

"May!"

She stared at May with delight, and then with horror.

"May!" she said again, "you look terrible."

As soon as she'd said that she was sorry.

"Have you been ill, May?"

The blonde hair was still there, but it was no longer glossy, and May's once proudly pink cheeks were sallow in comparison to how Rose remembered them at Southwold, and her figure once so curved and buxom was now as thin as it had been rounded.

"Yes, I've been ill, Rose—I've been ill."

May looked at Rose hopelessly.

"Yes, I've been ill all right."

"I was just thinking about you, May, and wondering how you were getting on. Did your ears burn?"

May hardly smiled at this old joke.

"No, my ears didn't burn, Rose."

"You were always saying your ears were burning at Southwold, do you remember, May?"

"Yes, I remember. Well, I must be getting along Rose, nice to see you."

Rose realised that because Aggie had turned and come back to join them May was put off staying and talking to her. She ran after her.

"May, since we haven't seen each other for such a long time, shouldn't we stay and have a chat? We have so much to talk about, May, haven't we?"

"No, we haven't, Rose."

"Please come, May, please. We're going to have a cup of tea and a cake in a tea shop. We can pay for you to have a cup of tea and a cake too, can't we, Aggie?"

"Course we can, Rose," said Aggie stoutly, "I got Mrs Bridges her card last month, so I shan't be needing no more of me wages."

May had no idea of who Mrs Bridges was or why her card was of any importance, but she was hungry, and the sight of Rose after all this time, weakened her resolve.

"All right then, but I can't be long, mustn't keep my trade waiting."

This remark had more effect on Aggie than it did on Rose, who was too busy thinking about May's ill appearance, and wondering what she'd had wrong with her.

The tea shop Aggie led them to was down a side street and Aggie greeted the owner, a buxom lady as plump and as cheerful-looking as her jam tarts, as though she was an old friend.

"She's very nice, Aggie, this is a very nice place," Rose looked round approvingly even though she had never been in a tea shop before, and had no yardstick to judge it by. "I like tasteful furnishings," she added.

"She's a kind of aunt of mine, by marriage once removed. She done well for herself," said Aggie, meaning the

manageress, "she'll give us a good price, Rose, so don't worry. She's good at wangling things to suit her old friends, is Margaret."

"I know a Margaret," said Rose, "she lives in the village. She's not a relation or anything though, Aggie."

Having exhausted this particular topic both girls now tactfully turned their attention to May.

Rose was dying to ask May how Mr Littleton was, but she'd noticed that May was not wearing a wedding ring, and so she decided not to. Instead she wondered what trade she was in remembering her previous reference to this subject.

"What trade do most girls like me end up in, Rose?" May stared at Rose cynically, and Rose who hadn't thought very much about what kind of trade girls like May ended up in, blushed to the roots of her hair. She would have liked to have exclaimed with horror, but she didn't.

The idea of poor May having to earn her living on the streets was terrible to her.

"What happened to Mr Littleton, May? Did he not want to marry you?"

May laughed humourlessly.

"You've got some funny ideas, Rose, what on earth made you think he wanted to marry me?"

"Well, nothing really, May, it was just that you having run away with him, I imagined, we all imagined, well that is, I just thought you might have done well for yourself, May, that's all."

"I've done well for myself, Rose, really well. I've ended up as a prostitute, that's how well I've done for myself."

The word 'prostitute' seemed to hang in the air, and for some time none of the girls addressed each other, only Aggie said 'ooh' unaffectedly delighted by the size of the slices of cake when they were brought to their table.

"A good cup of tea'll do you good," Aggie nodded encouragingly towards May, as if a cup of tea was going to cure May's troubles. "Mrs Bridges makes a good cup of tea," she added for no reason.

Rose frowned at Aggie. She felt it was tactless to mention Mrs Bridges in front of May, as a rich relation would forbear to mention their wealth in front of a poorer one. The

memory of how May had laughed at her when she confessed that she'd wanted to become a lady's maid came back to her. If she had had anything but kindness in her nature Rose would have felt smug at the memory, but as it was, all she felt was sadness. May had once been so beautiful, it didn't seem possible that she should come to this pass, and that she should be sitting at the tea table opposite her looking so ill, and almost old.

"I'm luckier than some though, at least I haven't had any babies. At least that bastard didn't leave me with a bun in the oven."

This statement didn't seem to have much effect on Aggie.

"You are lucky," she agreed cheerfully, "some people in your line have one little bugger after another."

"Aggie!"

Rose felt so upset by May that she turned on Aggie as if it were her fault May had to become a prostitute.

"You shouldn't talk like that, really, it's not nice."

"Why isn't it *nice*, Rose?" May sneered, "Still being the little lady all the time, I see? Your friend's right, Rose, most girls in my trade do have one little 'bugger' after another."

"Yes, they do, don't they?" Aggie nodded sagely, "at least May's been spared that, Rose. It makes it much worse you know, me mother always used to say that, on account of the fact that if the babies are girls—well it goes hard for them, it does."

"I wish there was some way I could help you, May," Rose cut across Aggie's wisdom. "I hate to see you looking so—unwell."

"Don't you worry, Rose, I'll be all right. Girls like me survive you know, somehow. We don't have to starve you know, we get by."

But by the way she ate her cake, and drank her tea, and by the thinness of her figure Rose knew that she was most likely lying.

There seemed very little to say after that. If Rose had wondered what had happened to May, and hoped that she would turn out like the lady they had seen stepping into the restaurant earlier, she now knew how wrong she'd been. She thought unhappily how she would much rather that her

fantasies about May had come true. May had been so determined to do better than the rest of them, and by the way she'd been, and her lovely looks, Rose had been as convinced as May herself that she would get on. "No dirty old butlers sniffing around my petticoats," she had said. Now there were men, perhaps worse than Mr Widgery, sniffing around her petticoats.

"Well, I must be off now," May got up, " 'bye Rose, nice to see you, but I can't stop. 'An hour away is an hour to pay' as they said in the trade. 'Bye."

"Goodbye, May."

Both girls watched her go out of the door and into the street, both of them imagining themselves to be her, and at the same time wondering what it would be like to be her.

"She didn't finish the icing on her cake," Aggie reached forward to May's plate.

"She never did like icing," said Rose.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mr Hudson looked at his watch.

Aggie had once calculated that Mr Hudson looked at his watch about twenty times a day. "It's a wonder he 'asn't worn the face out with his looking at it," she'd said, and there'd been one of those silences during which everyone looked at one another, afraid to be the first to laugh, and then, unable to resist Aggie's funny face and her innocent look, they'd all burst into fits of laughter.

"That Aggie, honestly she'll be the death of me with her ways," said Mrs Bridges later to Nanny.

"Ach, she's a bright wee thing," said Nanny, "and there's no getting away from that. She may be a mite too forward at times, but her heart's in the right place, Mrs Bridges."

"You're right, Nanny, and that's the main thing in my opinion," Mrs Bridges nodded vigorously, and drank her second cup of tea with gusto. Lady Marjorie had a dinner party that night and Mrs Bridges had been on her feet cooking all day and all the previous day, and she felt like a second if not a third cup of tea, even before she got through the first.

The reason for Mr Hudson consulting his watch was that Mr Bellamy had not returned from the House, and late though it was, Mr Hudson was required to wait up for his return.

Knowing the exact time when a person is waiting for someone, is of a peculiar comfort, if not of prime interest, to the person in question. The reason for Mr Hudson's interest, however, was not just that of a man employed in passing the time, but because Aggie, much-beloved of the staff at Eaton Place, was ill. She had been removed to hospital only two hours earlier, and Mr Hudson was waiting for Rose to return and give him news of her.

It seemed that Aggie had gone to bed as usual, having not previously complained of anything, but then all of a sudden she had clutched her stomach and complained of pains, and Rose being the sensible girl she was had called Mr Hudson, who had called the doctor, and within a very short space of time Aggie was being carried up the basement steps and conducted by carriage to the hospital.

The fact that one of his staff was ill would have always been a source of concern to Mr Hudson, but the fact that it was little Aggie, made it worse. He was quite frank in admitting this to himself. In fact, he thought it only proper that he should admit this to himself, and now he thought of it he wasn't in the least ashamed of his concern, although to other people it might seem a trifle too interested. Mr Hudson was well aware that as his position was that of a butler, it behoved him to be restrained in all things, but tonight his restraint was less conspicuous.

He walked up and down. He hoped that Rose would return with news soon.

Naturally, Lady Marjorie had had to be informed, and it was she who had expressly desired that her doctor should be called.

"Aggie's such a favourite," she'd said to Mr Hudson, and Hudson at that moment had been even more glad that he'd had the good fortune to find employment with Lady Marjorie at Eaton Place. Few of her kind ever bothered, and even fewer would have expressed anything but a passing interest in the fact that an under-housemaid was ill.

"Have James come round to the door with the carriage, just in case the doctor thinks she should be removed to hospital," she'd told Hudson.

"Very well, mi'lady."

Mr Bellamy returned.

"Her Ladyship required me to inform you that she has sent the carriage to hospital, on account of the fact that one of the housemaids has been taken ill, sir," Hudson removed Mr Bellamy's coat, and took his hat, cane, and gloves from him.

Richard tried not to smile.

Marjorie was so impulsive. It really wasn't quite suitable to send carriages careering all over London with sick house-

maids in them, but then it was so very like her, that he couldn't help smiling. He hoped that she would never stop being impulsive. She was his beautiful, impulsive Marjorie. So beautiful that tonight as he sat in the House he had been unable to think of anything except her radiance. Theirs was no fashionable marriage, he was happy to say. No blind eyes turned once the heir had been born. He couldn't have taken that, not for a minute. Any more than he could take the thought that she would ever stop being as beautiful and impulsive as she was at the moment.

"Have you had news of the poor girl yet, Hudson?" he turned as he went up the stairs.

"No, not yet, sir. With your permission I shall wait up for Rose to return with news of her condition."

"Yes, of course, of course."

Richard turned, and went up the stairs, slowly, because he didn't wish to seem too eager to go to bed.

Mr Hudson consulted his watch again. It was now two and a half hours since Rose had departed with Aggie. He couldn't help feeling more anxious than he would have liked to admit. If Aggie was only ill of a fever, Rose would surely have returned with the prognosis by now. He descended the stairs to the staff room, and resumed his pacing, but this time below stairs. It gave him a peculiar comfort to pace up and down and listen to the large clock ticking, even though it might appear to be unnecessary to someone else. Mr Hudson was very conscious of how he must seem, and he was sure that to others of his calling he might appear to be exercising undue concern over a trifle, but at that particular moment all he could think of was poor little Aggie being carried up the steps, her face so white and drawn.

"Rose!"

Mr Hudson opened the basement door, and let Rose in. She was drenched with the rain that was pouring down outside, and just at first he was too concerned with bustling her into the house to notice that she looked as if she had been crying.

"Rose, how is Aggie?" Mr Hudson looked so grave that Rose knew that he knew the answer before he had even taken her cloak.

"She's dead, Mr Hudson. She died about an hour ago."

Rose looked at him for a second, and then seeing him cross himself, she did the same.

"God have mercy on her, Rose, the poor little girl."

"It was her appendix, Mr Hudson. The doctor said she'd probably had pains before, but never noticed them. You know what Aggie was like, Mr Hudson, always bobbing up and down, and hopping and skipping, and worrying about whose birthday it was next, and I don't know what. Why, she wouldn't have noticed if her right arm had been hanging off, would she, Mr Hudson?"

Mr Hudson shook his head.

"No, she wouldn't. The poor little girl."

"She might have known I was there, I don't know. They say people can sense these things you know, Mr Hudson. And that we don't know how much they know, same as babies, if you know what I mean. I sat with her and held her arm, long after they'd closed her eyes," Rose turned away. She did not like Mr Hudson to see how affected she had become.

Mr Hudson cleared his throat.

"You did well, Rose, very well. If I may say so, the whole way you have acted has been with a maturity far beyond your years."

Rose could not make a reply. The memory of Aggie skipping ahead of her on their day off, her perky little hat set determinedly forward—"Used to belong to me grandma, Rose. She gorn and left it to me, made me mother hopping mad, I can tell yer"—flooded over her. Dear little Aggie.

"I will get in touch with the hospital in the morning and make the necessary arrangements," Mr Hudson appeared to be talking to himself.

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

"Goodnight, Rose."

"Goodnight, Mr Hudson."

They both walked silently up to their separate rooms.

Neither slept, and when morning came and Rose dressed silently on her own without Aggie's usual 'hats straight, shoes polished, aprons tied, and off we go' her desolation was unbearable.

Mrs Bridges was making a manful attempt to cook break-

fast, and scold Patty in her usual way, but no-one failed to notice that her eyes were red, and every now and then when she thought no-one was looking she quickly wiped her eyes on her apron.

Normally meals at Eaton Place were a cheerful affair—unlike at Southwold—although the ritual of the older servants being served first and younger servants not eating until the vegetables was observed. Nevertheless Mr Hudson's personality, strict though it was, was considerably pleasanter than Mr Widgery's, and then Aggie could always be relied upon to make someone, if not everyone, laugh.

"There was something about her," Mrs Bridges looked forlornly over the top of her cup of tea at Miss Roberts.

"Lady Marjorie is very upset," Miss Roberts shook her head sadly.

Lady Marjorie was upset. The first sadness in marriage is always taken hard. Everything at Eaton Place had been so lovely. Their marriage, the birth of their children, not a ripple had disturbed the prolonged honeymoon, but now the young household mourned Aggie's death, as if she had been a favourite little dog. Normally housemaids were housemaids, but Aggie was different. Just as the barking of a dog is missed, and his lead and collar hanging sadly in the hall remind the owner of its passing, so every little ritual at Eaton Place seemed to miss Aggie's cheerful presence.

"I can hardly face my food now, I don't know why."

Mrs Bridges had a habit of voicing what everyone else was intent on being too polite to mention.

"Every time I pick up my knife and fork I seem to hear Aggie saying something. It's putting me off my food, I can tell you. Do you remember when she told us that story about her uncle and the dog that leapt on to the table and pinched the leg of mutton? And how he and the owner chased it the length of Whitechapel with a butterfly net and a mop? Lord, I can see her face now, telling us about that."

"Even that silly wee canary in the nursery seemed to like Aggie," Nanny got up, "and now you'd think it missed her, you would really. James asked for her this morning, but of course we said she'd gone on holiday. Children don't understand about these things."

The general feeling following this remark was that children were not the only ones that did not understand about these things.

Rose hated the freedom of her room unshared. Although she was working twice as hard until a new under-housemaid could be found she found it impossible to sleep. Aggie's regular breathing, and her ability to fall asleep on command, had had a soothing effect on her. But now she was gone, not even reading her Bible and attempting to memorise sections of it, managed to make her fall asleep. She would lie awake hour after hour staring at the ceiling and remembering things that made her sad.

"Rose! What are you doing here?"

"Mr Hudson! Sorry, Mr Hudson. I came down for a drink of water. I don't seem able to sleep these last weeks, and I came down for a drink of water."

"Rose, you know full well that is for—for—bidden to come down to the kitchen after you have gone to your room. Please do not let me catch you doing so ever again, do—do you understand—me?"

Mr Hudson had one hand on the table, and he gestured awkwardly with the other. Having delivered his speech he then sat down very suddenly. He was drunk.

"I'm very sorry, Mr Hudson."

Mr Hudson appeared not to have heard.

Rose prepared to depart without her glass of water. The bell rang from upstairs. She looked at Mr Hudson, he appeared not to have heard it. It rang again.

"Rose, where's Hudson?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Bellamy sir, but Mr Hudson is not feeling well."

"Not feeling well? What's the matter with him? He was perfectly 'well' at dinner."

"Yes, Mr Bellamy, but he's not well now. I think it could be a sick headache. My mother suffered most dreadfully from sick headaches. I offered to wait up for him, until you retired, and he hoped you would excuse him, sir."

Richard Bellamy looked at Rose. He was quite sure that she was lying. If Hudson had not been feeling well, then he

would most certainly have detailed Beatrice, and not Rose, to wait up in his place. He frowned.

"I wanted the decanter re-filled, but I imagine that is beyond your capabilities since Hudson has the key to the cellar."

"I expect I could find what you want, sir," Rose tried not to look too eager.

Richard Bellamy looked searchingly at her again. And then because he was tired he shrugged his shoulders. If there was trouble below-stairs, he would no doubt find out about it in the morning, and if there wasn't and Hudson had suddenly developed a tendency for sick headaches, well then that too he would find out about in the morning.

"Hudson, I understand you were suffering from a severe headache last night."

"Yes, sir?"

"Rose informed me, Hudson, that like her mother, you suffer from headaches, is that so?"

Hudson struggled with his conscience.

"I have been known to have headaches, sir, unfortunately, but they are very rare."

"I understand that last night you were suffering from just such a one?"

"I am still feeling the effects this morning, sir," said Hudson with complete truth.

"I hope these headaches do not become too frequent, Hudson."

"No, sir, I believe that judging from the last few years, sir, that these headaches are becoming increasingly rare as I have just said, and with good luck, they should soon cease to make themselves felt at all. Like Rose's mother, sir, my own father suffered from—"

"Yes, yes, thank you, Hudson. That will be all."

"Thank you, sir."

Hudson withdrew.

"Rose?"

"Yes, Mr Hudson?"

"I believe you informed Mr Bellamy that I suffered from sick headaches, and that I was suffering from just such a one last night?"

"Yes, Mr Hudson."

Mr Hudson looked at Rose.

"We have both been suffering, have we not, Rose?"

"Yes, Mr. Hudson."

"We have all been feeling sad, and I'm afraid that because of this I gave into a former weakness." Mr Hudson concentrated on the piece of silver he was polishing. It was not easy to say what he knew he had to. "Thank you for saying what you did, Rose."

"That's all right, Mr Hudson. As Aggie would say—'anything for a friend'."

They both smiled.

Rose tried to close her Bible, but Eddie's medal stuck awkwardly out of its pages, as if that being the one memory that she had not re-lived, it was determined to bring itself to her notice.

Poor Eddie!

She remembered how excited she had been when he had called in his brand new uniform. As excited as when her father had brought Tatty home on her birthday. Eddie looking so broad and so handsome, that in her opinion he could have passed for an officer.

The day they'd spent in London had been like a dream, or a story that you read in a journal. Eddie'd had money to burn, and burn it he had. He'd even bought her a hat. A hat that she still wore on Sundays together with Grandmother's shawl, and she made sure that she kept them spotless and as smart as the day they'd been given to her.

Naturally they'd fallen in love. As so many other girls and boys were falling in love at that moment. The boys were off to fight for England in South Africa, and they were as brave as young men always were when they were off to fight a war. They were going to win, of course, they were going to come back heroes, of course.

"I'll send you my medal, Rose," Eddie'd cried as she waved to him at the station, and he had, only he'd failed to come back with it.

Rose sighed. Men were awful fools, but it was no use telling them. Tomorrow was the first Wednesday in the month. Albert always wrote on the first Wednesday of the month. She wondered if he would remember it was her birthday. She hoped so.

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Below stairs is the domain of the butler, Mr Hudson, under whose stern guidance the cook, Mrs Bridges, the Parlourmaid, Rose, and Albert the footman pursue their ordered rounds – at least until the arrival of a cheeky East End waif named Sarah, underhouse parlourmaid and self-styled gypsy princess.

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